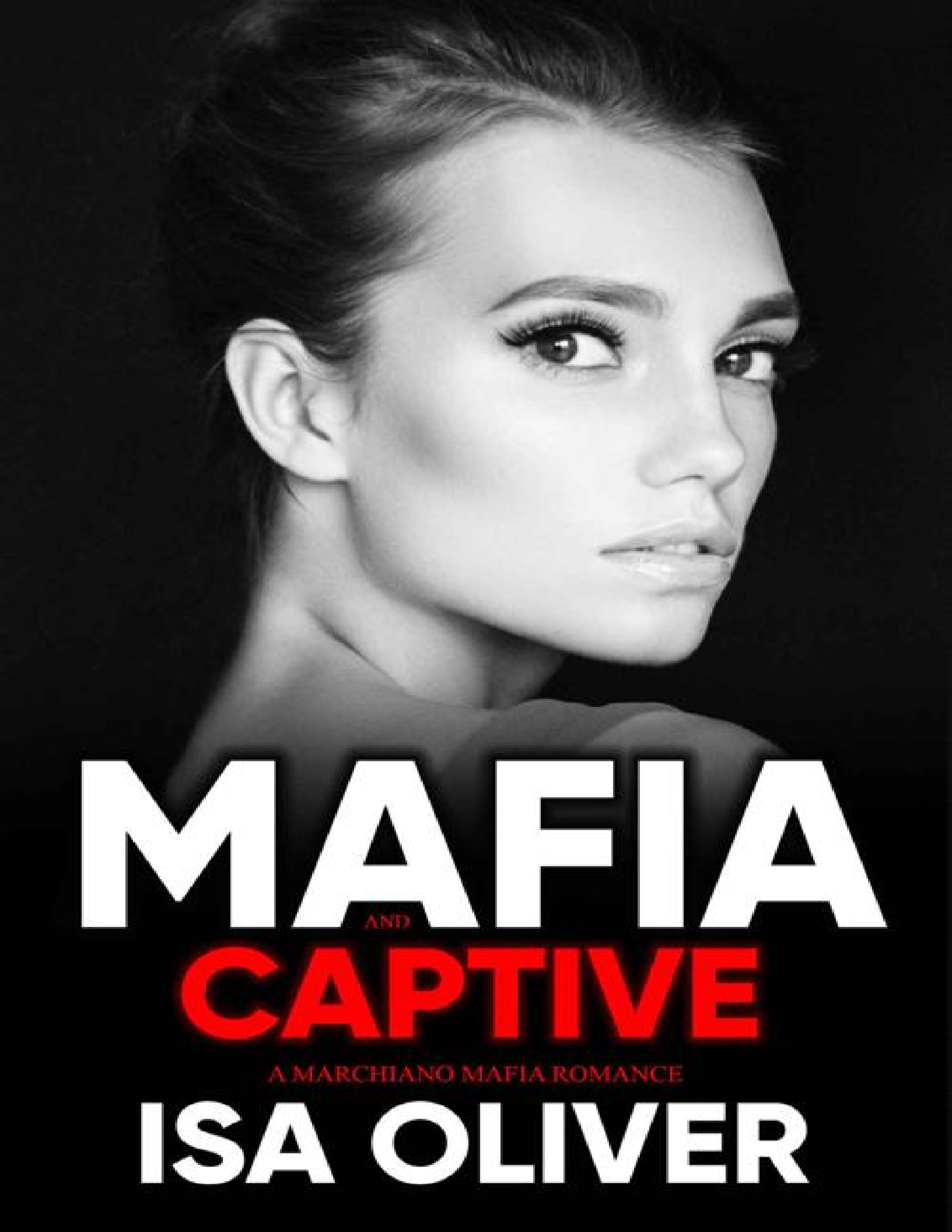
MAFIA
AND
CAPTIVE
A MARCHIANO MAFIA ROMANCE
ISA OLIVER

MAFIA AND CAPTIVE

ISA OLIVER

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MAFIA AND CAPTIVE

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This book features an Italian Mafia arranged marriage, enemies to lovers, an age gap, and a dark captive romance.

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Contents

DEDICATION

AUTHOR'S NOTE

CONTENT NOTE-SPOILERS

MAFIA FAMILES

FACEBOOK GROUP AND ARCS

1. CHAPTER 1

2. CHAPTER 2

3. CHAPTER 3

4. CHAPTER 4

5. CHAPTER 5

6. CHAPTER 6

7. CHAPTER 7

8. CHAPTER 8

9. CHAPTER 9

10. CHAPTER 10

11. CHAPTER 11

12. CHAPTER 12

13. CHAPTER 13

14. CHAPTER 14

15. CHAPTER 15

16. CHAPTER 16

17. CHAPTER 17

18. CHAPTER 18

19. CHAPTER 19

20. CHAPTER 20

21. CHAPTER 21

22. CHAPTER 22

23. CHAPTER 23

24. CHAPTER 24

25. CHAPTER 25

26. CHAPTER 26

27. CHAPTER 27

28. CHAPTER 28

29. CHAPTER 29

30. CHAPTER 30

31. CHAPTER 31

32. CHAPTER 32

33. CHAPTER 33

34. CHAPTER 34

35. CHAPTER 35

36. EPILOGUE

37. SNEAK PEEK

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DEDICATION

For my beautiful family.
I love you to the moon and back, always and forever.
xxx

Acknowledgements: Thank you so, so much to my family for allowing me the time to write and for your love and support. A huge thank you to Magan for all your help and knowledge. Thank you to Chrisandra for your help and support with this book. And also thanks to lovely Peachy Keen Author Services. And thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the lovely readers, reviewers, and bloggers for your support.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader, please note that while not wholly dark, this book is categorized as a dark romance due to some subject matter. Specific topics are listed on the next page. Please note that any beliefs, views, opinions, and statements in this novel are the views of specific characters as part of the storyline, and they are not the views of the author. Love Isa xxx

<u>Marchiano Mafia Series (all can be read as standalones):</u>

Mafia And Captive

(An Age Gap Dark Captive Romance)

Mafia And Protector

(A Dark Arranged Marriage Romance)

Mafia And Angel

(A Single Dad Age Gap Arranged Marriage)

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CONTENT NOTE-SPOILERS

Topics include:

…

…

…

Mafia violence

Captive romance

Physical torture (not of the heroine)

Murder

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MAFIA FAMILES

Marchiano Family: Fratellanza Mafia, Chicago

Marco Marchiano (Capo)

Alessio Marchiano (Consigliere) - Marco’s brother

Camillo Marchiano - Marco’s brother

Danio Marchiano - Marco’s brother

Debora Marchiano - Marco’s sister

Lorenzo Marchiano - Marco’s cousin

Annunciata Marchiano - Lorenzo’s wife

Santino Family: Società Mafia, Los Angeles

Emanuel Santino (Capo)

Gabriel Santino - Emanuel’s son and heir

Rafael Santino - Emanuel’s son

Bonardi Family: Società Mafia, Los Angeles

Cecilio Bonardi (Underboss)

Casmundina Bonardi - Cecilio’s wife

Jacob Bonardi - Cecilio’s son and heir

Juliana Bonardi - Cecilio’s daughter

Jessica Bonardi - Cecilio’s daughter

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CHAPTER 1

Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

— the words every Made Man recites upon a death.

JULIANA

My younger sister, Jessica, handed over the garment bag that my mother had sent upstairs. I took it eagerly because I loved new clothes, yet I was also half-filled with dread since I knew my mother's taste was somewhat questionable.

Looking inside the bag, my heart sank as my eyes were assaulted by the glitzy sparkle of red sequins. "It's one of Mother's specialties," I sighed.

“Oh my,” said Jessica, as I pulled the outfit out of the bag, revealing a red-sequined skirt suit with a tight pencil skirt and matching jacket. This was the outfit my mother wanted me to wear at my meeting today with my father and Emanuel Santino.

Emanuel Santino was Capo, the boss of the Società Mafia in L.A. My father, Cecilio Bonardi, was one of his Underbosses, thus holding a powerful position in the organization. This was the first time I had been summoned by the Capo, and I was dreading it. If I had the choice, I would be anywhere but meeting him today. However, as a girl in the Mafia world, my main duty was to obey.

I looked in the bag again, but the only other items were skyscraper heels in hot pink and a pink purse. I would have said that my mother intended them to go with the outfit, but they clearly clashed rather than coordinated.

“What am I supposed to wear under the jacket? Should I just use one of my existing blouses? Do you think a white blouse would be the best option with this color combination?” My unease about today was clouding my mind, making even the smallest decision impossible.

“Sorry, I forgot to say—Mother said to tell you not to wear a blouse with it.”

I gave a slight questioning look to Jessica but pulled on the skirt and jacket. “The jacket reveals too much of my cleavage to be decent,” I murmured, cringing at my reflection in the bedroom mirror.

“I think that’s Mother’s objective,” said Jessica, as she also winced at my appearance.

I looked in alarm at the clothes. This outfit was my mother’s idea of what a girl my age should be wearing in order to snare a good Mafia husband.

“Juliana, hurry up!” my mother shrieked up the stairs. “Your father is waiting.”

I looked quickly at my sister in desperation. “Jess, you’ve got to help me put a tear in the skirt.”

“What do you mean?” Her brow puckered in confusion, but I knew she would help me because she was my best friend as well as my sister.

I turned around so that my back was to her. “Pull at the back slit so that the seam comes apart.”

I felt a tug on my skirt and heard a rip. “That should spell the end for this skirt,” she giggled.

I rushed downstairs, finding my mother waiting for me in the foyer. Everything about her was over-the-top: big hair, brash clothes, bold shoulder pads, and a loud voice. Her entire being was a throwback to the Eighties.

Tears gathered in her eyes at the sight of me, and she started sobbing loudly. “You look absolutely perfect. The Capo will be so impressed with you!”

Dear God, I was already feeling jittery with nerves, and my mother’s dramatics were the last thing I needed right now.

I turned around and heard a sharp intake of breath from my mother. “What on earth has happened to your skirt?”

I fixed a look of dismay on my face. “The skirt was skintight, and it ripped when I tried to walk in it.”

“Why does the Lord try me in this way?” wailed my mother at the top of her voice. “Today is such an important day for our family, the first time the Capo is requesting to see my eldest daughter!”

My father came inside at that moment. “Are you still not ready, Juliana?” he said impatiently, ignoring Mother. He pulled back his sleeve, looking pointedly at his watch. “We’ll be late for the Capo.”

“You’ll have to go up and change,” screeched Mother. “Be quick—you know you can’t keep the Capo waiting.”

As I dashed upstairs, I started unbuttoning the jacket and I peeled it off the moment I was inside my bedroom, grabbing a much simpler dress from my closet. Once dressed, I ran back downstairs and out to the waiting car.

On our manicured front lawn, I saw my mother throw herself to her knees in front of our stone statue of the Virgin Mary, pressing her hands together in supplication and muttering like a crazy person. Our family followed the Italian-American custom of displaying a saint statue in our front yard. My mother, however, only prayed to our Virgin Mary when one of three things was involved: death, money, or power.

No one had died as far as I was aware, nor did I expect that the Capo wished to see me to give me a large sum of money. Therefore, that left the only reason for my summons today to be a power play—somehow, I was going to be used as a pawn in one of the Società’s twisted power games, and the thought of that made me shudder.

***

“Juliana, Cecilio, come in,” Emanuel Santino said in a severe tone, ushering us both into his office.

With only a slight hesitation, I walked forward and entered the office with my father at my side, tightly clenching my fists to stop my hands from shaking.

“Sit down,” Emanuel instructed. Neither he nor my father showed any emotion on their faces as I looked from one to the other.

“You’re probably wondering why I have asked to speak to you today?” Emanuel fixed his dark stare on me.

“Yes, sir,” I answered, trying not to sound as nervous as I felt.

I was sure that my father and I had been summoned here to discuss an engagement to Emanuel Santino’s eldest son. A union between our two families would send a message of strength to our rivals—this was a match that had been planned by our families for a long time, and today I was dreading that it would finally be formalized.

I tried hard to look the Capo in the eye while he was talking, although just looking at him filled me with trepidation.

I smoothed my dress over my legs, then stopped, knowing that fiddling with my hands and clothes irritated my father. He said it revealed my nerves, and that showing nerves was showing weakness.

After accidentally-on-purpose ripping the red outfit, I had changed into an elegant powder-blue dress, and my dark hair was held back in a low ponytail. I was nineteen years old now, and a certain level of style was demanded of me at formal Società occasions—and being summoned to see the Capo was definitely one of those occasions.

“Juliana, you will have heard that we in the Società are forming an alliance with the Fratellanza in Chicago,” Emanuel carried on.

I nodded. I wasn’t sure what the Fratellanza had to do with me, but I knew better than to say anything to the Capo unless asked a direct question.

The Fratellanza had killed several of our men over the last few years, and they were regarded as the most brutal Mafia organization in the United States. The Società were also Mafia, and while I was under no illusions about their illegal dealings, they were at least known to conduct themselves with honor; indeed, they prided themselves on it—honor among thieves.

The Fratellanza, on the other hand, had no such honor.

“Some of my Underbosses and Captains are insisting on a marriage between us and the Fratellanza. They see a union between the families as being a good way to cement the business arrangement and our ongoing relationship.”

As I listened to him, a sense of unease unfurled over my body, making the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

“I have decided, therefore, that you should marry the Capo of the Fratellanza. Your wedding to Marco Marchiano will be in two months’ time.”

I managed to stop a gasp from escaping my lips. I was to be married to Marco Marchiano.

I was to be married to the most brutal Capo in the Mafia.

This couldn’t be happening, I thought, as panic engulfed my body and I felt sweat trickle down my back. Marco Marchiano murdered his own parents at the age of eighteen so that he could take over as head of the Fratellanza.

He was a true monster.

I started to feel light-headed. I told myself to breathe, just breathe. I just had to get through the next few minutes.

Emanuel turned to my father. “Your eldest daughter is the perfect choice for this union.”

My father tried to hide his surprise. “Yes, it’s just that I thought Juliana and your eldest son, Gabriel, would eventually marry, as we’ve discussed from time to time.”

“Cecilio, I am sure you’ll agree that the alliance between L.A. and Chicago is the more pressing matter at the current time, given the difficulties we are having with the Bratva.” Emanuel’s voice carried a clear tone of impatience as he referred to the Società’s ongoing problems with the Russian Mafia.

“Yes, yes, of course you are right,” spluttered my father. I suddenly wondered why I had even been asked to this meeting since my father and the Capo were discussing me as if I wasn’t here.

It was like my mind was in a fog. I couldn’t look at the Capo, so I focused my gaze on my father, while trying to ignore my racing pulse and sweaty palms.

“So, I have your agreement,” said Emanuel to my father. It wasn’t a question; it was a statement.

“Yes, certainly, anything the organization requires.” My father was as careful as always not to cross the Capo on any matter. Of course, I wasn’t asked for my consent. That was taken as a given if my father agreed, and he just had.

I had been right when I had thought that today I would be made a pawn in a power play.

I had always known that as a Mafia daughter, I would have an arranged marriage. I would marry a man chosen by my family since marriages in our world were chiefly a means to strengthen ties and allegiances.

I hadn’t expected, however, that I would be married to someone who was considered a savage, without the honor that the Mafia required of its

members.

My father and the Capo both looked toward me, and I realized that they were expecting me to say something.

“I-I won’t have finished school by then…”

“Your schooling is a formality and is hardly something you’ll need as a wife,” said my father irritably, dismissing my objection out of hand.

Emanuel continued staring at me with a penetrating look as if daring me to defy him, so I said the only thing that I could. “I understand.” I wondered if it was my voice that I had just heard, the sound seeming far away and as if it, perhaps, belonged to someone else.

“The engagement party will be held in a week’s time, and the marriage will take place in two months. It is imperative that we get the alliance between our organizations settled as soon as possible.” It was clear that I was just part of a business arrangement, but I felt like screaming that this was my whole life that they were talking about.

“Juliana, go wait in the foyer. Your father and I have a few business matters to discuss.” I realized that I had been dismissed.

I couldn’t wait to get out of this room—I felt I was suffocating within these four walls.

I had been dreading coming here today, thinking that the meeting would mark my engagement to Emanuel Santino’s eldest son. I hadn’t expected, however, to be told that I was about to be married to a rival Mafia Capo.

Right now, the prospect of marrying someone like the Santino heir seemed like a fairytale ending.

Instead, I was marrying Marco Marchiano, and my nightmare was just beginning.

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CHAPTER 2

JULIANA

“I can’t believe they’re making you marry that monster,” whispered Jessica.

I was in my bedroom with her and my mother, putting the finishing touches to my dark hair for the engagement party which would start imminently. The week’s reprieve before my engagement had flown by.

I felt something soft brush up against me. “Hey, boy,” I said, looking down at my dog. I was rewarded by him enthusiastically thumping his fluffy tail from side to side.

“I wish you girls wouldn’t let that animal into your bedrooms,” admonished my mother. “It leaves fur everywhere, and your dress for tonight is going to be covered in it if you continue letting it put its paws on your lap.”

She tried shooing him away. However, he was such a good-natured dog that he thought she was playing with him, and he leaped up at her and barked excitedly.

“Help, help! He’s trying to kill me!” screeched my mother, her arms flailing madly around herself.

We heard running footsteps thunder toward my room and the door burst open. Two soldiers rushed into the room, their guns aimed in front of them.

I rolled my eyes at my mother’s theatrics as I gently pulled the dog away from her. “It’s okay,” I told the soldiers. “No one is about to die.”

They took in what was happening and, with the smallest of sighs, holstered their weapons and retreated from the room.

I stroked the dog’s soft ears as I looked around my childhood bedroom in our family mansion. My home held precious memories of my childhood and of happy times with my siblings, Jacob and Jessica. My siblings meant the world to me. I would do everything in my power to keep them safe, and I’d often found myself wishing we hadn’t been born into the Mafia world with all its inherent threats and dangers.

“Are you actually going to marry him?” Jess carried on, worrying her lower lip. She was even more nervous than I was, if that was even possible.

I put my necklace around my throat and tried to fasten the clasp, but my shaking fingers made the task difficult. “Jess, it’s not as if I have any choice in the matter—none of us do in this life. You know our only purpose is to obey and do our duty.”

Obedience and duty. Those two words had been drummed into me from a very young age, and I was sick of hearing them.

My mother frowned. “Honestly, Jessica, it’s a great honor that Juliana has been chosen for this union.”

“More like Juliana was the default choice, given that Emanuel Santino’s own daughter is too young to marry,” pointed out Jess.

“Juliana will be marrying the Capo of Chicago, placing her in a position of power and making her the envy of many.” My mother, Casmundina Bonardi, was a typical Mafia wife: obedient and demure, yet ruthlessly ambitious for her family.

“Mother, we all know that as a woman, I will hold no power. My sole duties will be to obey my husband and provide him with heirs.”

“Well, regardless, make sure you look happy at the prospect. Today will be Marco Marchiano’s first opportunity to see his proposed bride. He is eight years older than you, and he will expect a certain level of maturity from you, not to mention that your father will be furious if you do not perform well today.”

Perform. I was terrified; however, I knew that I could not show weakness to Marco Marchiano, and I hoped I would be able to put on the best performance of my life. The age gap between us concerned me, but to be honest, that was the least of my worries.

My mother carried on babbling away, not giving me a moment’s peace. “I’m overjoyed that at least one of my daughters will make a great marriage. Jessica, you really should make more of an effort with your appearance. It will be your turn to marry soon, but I’m not sure who will want to marry a girl as plain as you.”

Jessica merely shrugged off the remark, being used to our mother’s tactlessness. It pained me, though, when I heard people refer to her as being plain.

My mother thought it was a tragedy that Jessica hadn’t been blessed with the same striking eyes as my brother and me. I thought, however, that

Jessica was pretty in her own way; even more importantly, she was the kindest girl I knew. Unfortunately, in this world, and particularly in the Mafia life, people were too concerned with superficial qualities: women were supposed to be beautiful, and men were meant to be powerful.

I checked my reflection in the mirror above the dresser. “I just don’t see why I have to be yanked out of school so suddenly—I wish I could have finished high school at least.”

Although I was nineteen, I had missed a year of school after a severe bout of pneumonia, so I still had a few months left until I would receive my High School Diploma. I had been hoping to persuade my father to let me study veterinary nursing afterward, although I knew that would have been a long shot given the sort of life we led.

“Don’t think your father didn’t tell me that when Emanuel spoke to you, you tried to use your schooling as an excuse not to marry. As if you’ll need a High School Diploma to be a Mafia wife!” exclaimed my mother, throwing her hands into the air. “You are lucky you weren’t ‘yanked’ out of school before now and sent to the old country to learn how to cook.”

The old country—by that she meant Italy, the land of her birth and a place she reminisced about through rose-tinted glasses.

“You girls have had a privileged upbringing with servants to see to your every need, and when you marry, your husband will provide the same sort of wealthy lifestyle. High School Diploma, indeed,” she huffed.

“I only meant—”

“I don’t care what you meant, Juliana. Sometimes I think my daughters have turned into tactless Americans, despite my best efforts to bring you up in the traditions of the old country.”

“But why does it all have to take place so quickly? Two months is hardly any time to make all the wedding arrangements.”

What I really meant was that two months was not enough time to prepare myself. I would be leaving everyone and everything I knew here in L.A. and moving across the country to Chicago to be the wife of the Fratellanza Capo.

“Don’t worry,” smiled my mother. “I have everything under control. I have been waiting a long time for the day when one of my children gets married. It is the event that everyone is talking about, and it will be the wedding of the year!”

I looked at Jess. We both knew that the reason everyone was talking about the wedding was because of their shock that the Società would wed one of their daughters to a brutal savage like Marco Marchiano.

I was being married off to a barbarian who had murdered his own parents. A shudder ran through me at the mere thought of meeting this man.

I knew that some other Società families had been jealous when it had been rumored that I would wed Emanuel Santino’s son and heir, and other mothers had been envious that I was considered to be a beauty. Right now, however, I would give anything to be unattractive and uninteresting so that Marco Marchiano would not want to marry me.

There was a knock at my bedroom door, and my older brother, Jacob, popped his head around the door. “Hey, the Marchianos have arrived and are downstairs in the drawing room talking to Father and the Santino family. Father wants Juliana to come down now.”

I took one last look at my reflection in the mirror before I stood up, straightened my back and held my head high, preparing myself to walk into the lion’s den.

MARCO

We had arrived in L.A. at the home of the Bonardi family. It was my first visit to L.A. in years.

Two of my brothers, Alessio and Camillo, had accompanied me today, along with some of my best soldiers.

My brothers and I ruled the Fratellanza with a fist of iron. Together we were known as the ‘Kings of Chicago.’ On our way to the top, we had killed many men and made numerous enemies, one of them being the Società.

As we drove up to the house, we could see that the front door was already open and there was a welcoming committee: Emanuel Santino and Cecilio Bonardi. Of course, the guards at the gate had already radioed ahead to alert them of our arrival.

“This is our last opportunity to change our minds,” Alessio declared, as I clicked the car into park and turned off the engine.

“No chance,” I drawled. "I’m looking forward to seeing the virgin they have chosen to sacrifice to me.”

My brother, Alessio, didn’t think much of this marriage that the Società was insisting on. He had analyzed the situation and still wasn’t convinced that the merits would outweigh the downsides. However, our escalating problems with the Russian Bratva meant that this strategic alliance would be highly beneficial for both sides.

“Cecilio Bonardi must be crazy agreeing to marry off his daughter to you,” added my other brother, Camillo, who was sitting behind us. He

shook his head. “I mean, you’re hardly ideal son-in-law material.”

I chuckled. “I’m going to enjoy this. I like nothing more than seeing other people afraid of me, and I’m sure that the young girl chosen will not disappoint in that regard.” I knew she was eight years younger than me, but she was of age and that was all that mattered.

I looked at the large Bonardi mansion and its spacious grounds. “Judging by this, Cecilio Bonardi has done well for himself."

Over the years, the families running the Società had become very wealthy. They had started out in L.A. by controlling the port and the drug trade before extending their influence into various other enterprises.

Today was the official engagement party and the signing of the engagement contract between our organizations. The Italian Mafia was a traditional institution, and our families still followed the custom of signing an engagement contract.

At twenty-seven years of age, I was the eldest of my siblings. I had been initiated at the age of twelve, and from that day I had become a Made Man, a man who was part of the Mafia. Now I was Capo of the Fratellanza.

Alessio was my Consigliere, my second-in-command, while Camillo managed the enforcement side of our business. Our two youngest siblings, Danio and Debora, had stayed home in Chicago today.

“I still don’t fully trust the bastards. Are all the security details in place?” I asked Alessio.

“It’s all under control. I’ve made detailed plans regarding protection for today.”

It was unlikely that they would try anything, but we all knew that you could never be sure of anything in our world.

We got out of our black SUV, and Alessio and Camillo followed me up the front steps of the Bonardi mansion.

“Marchiano,” greeted Emanuel Santino, holding out his hand to shake mine. We all reluctantly shook hands, eyeballing each other and not trusting each other one bit. “Let’s go through to the drawing room.”

As we entered the drawing room, I winced inwardly at the sight that greeted me.

Fuck, it was straight out of the old country.

This room was obviously kept for special occasions, where guests were entertained and family photographs taken to be sent back to the relations in Italy, the décor screaming that the inhabitants of this house had ‘made it’ out here in the Land of Stars and Stripes.

The furniture was heavy and carved, the chairs having ridiculous over-the-top scrolls on their arms and legs. Anything that wasn’t covered in gaudy crimson fabric was coated instead with glitzy gold paint. There was more gold in the excessive mirrors and sconces adorning the walls, the latter covered in burgundy flocked wallpaper.

There was even a green, white, and red Italian flag in the corner of the room, among various Italian ‘heirlooms.’

It was the height of tackiness and a travesty of Italian style. I sighed, hoping that my wife-to-be did not take after her mother in the style stakes.

Gabriel Santino and Jacob Bonardi were waiting for us inside the room. Gabriel was now twenty-six years old and would inherit the position of Società Capo upon his father’s death. However, everyone knew that Gabriel was already heavily involved in managing their affairs, and it was predicted that he would be a ruthless and effective leader.

After drinks and small talk, Jacob was dispatched by his father to fetch his sister, Juliana.

Emanuel looked at me. “It is a shame that my own daughter is not old enough yet to marry. However, I am sure that you will not be disappointed with the girl we have to offer to you.”

At that moment the door quietly opened, and everyone turned to look at the girl entering. I had been told that she was nineteen years old. She walked with a straight back and her head held high; however, her stiff posture gave away the fear she felt. Good, I wanted a wife who would fear me and obey me.

She hesitated, unsure where to go, before walking carefully toward her father and stopping at his side.

She was indeed a beauty. I guessed that she was around five foot five, yet even in her heels she would only just reach my chin. She was slender but with curves in all the right places, her figure shown off in an ivory dress which was in striking contrast to her silky dark hair.

The ivory dress had probably been her parents’ idea to emphasize her purity, although I preferred to think of her as the lamb chosen to be sacrificed at the altar of the Fratellanza.

Despite her attractive body, it was her eyes I was drawn to. Their startling blue gaze briefly looked at me before quickly darting away.

The innocence in those big blue pools attracted me like a bee to honey—I couldn’t wait to be the one to take her and ruin her.

Although she avoided looking at me, I had no qualms at letting my eyes run over my bride-to-be. Today we would be signing the engagement contract, and I wanted to see what I would be getting. Her innocent cheeks

flushed with heat as she felt my assessing stare upon her, and I knew I would make them blush even more on our wedding night.

I saw Gabriel Santino steal a glance at her. I detected a flicker of something in his eyes—I wasn't sure what it was, and it took me a few moments to realize it was a flash of attraction.

My shoulders tensed. Of course I had heard that the Società had originally discussed a possible engagement between Juliana and Gabriel, but that was history now as far as everyone was concerned. They better stay away from each other, I thought, and he better keep his hands off her—because she was mine now.

"So, what do you think?" Juliana's father interrupted my thoughts. "Does she meet to your satisfaction? I can assure you that she will make you an excellent wife. She is obedient and submissive, and I am certain she will bring you pleasure in every way." Her father could have been talking about a racehorse. Or a whore.

But then women in the Mafia world were treated like chattels—like mere possessions. They were there to please their husband and produce children. Every Made Man required a male heir to look powerful and command respect from his own men. And I was sure that she could bring me satisfaction in that respect.

"We need some time to speak alone," I said, stating what I wanted rather than asking. I was a Capo; I would not ask permission from anyone to talk to my future bride.

"Of course, of course," her father nodded. He seemed keen on this union and did not hesitate to leave his daughter alone with me. I was sure that if I had a daughter, however, I wouldn't leave her alone in the company of someone like me.

They filed out of the room, and as the heavy door clicked shut, Juliana looked at it as if her last lifeline had just expired.

She stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, not having moved a step from where she had been standing.

“Come closer,” I commanded. “I want to get a proper look at what I’m getting.” I saw no need to mince my words. I would own her soon enough, and the sooner she understood that, the better.

At my words, she stiffened her spine and lifted her chin. Her blue eyes, fringed with inky long lashes, looked directly into mine. She was trying to give an illusion of confidence; however, the slight tremor in her hands betrayed her fear.

She walked forward but deliberately stopped a few steps away from me.

“Closer. I don’t bite, unless you want me to,” I growled.

She flinched at my words. Oh, how I would enjoy toying with this little innocent. She took another step toward me but kept her eyes fixed on a spot to the right of my head. She was having trouble meeting my gaze now that she was closer to me.

She was still a few steps away from me. I sighed and stepped toward her, seizing her wrists and pulling her toward me.

She gasped. “Wh-What are you doing?”

“If I tell you to do something, I expect obedience.” My tone was terse.

She was breathing a little too quickly, and I could feel her pulse beating rapidly in the wrists that I was still holding.

“Look at me,” I demanded, and she slowly raised her eyes up to me. “Have you agreed to this union?” I asked her.

“I did agree.”

We stared at each other.

She took a deep breath as if to give her courage for what she said next. “But we all know that women in this world have no real choice. Our duty is to obey and do whatever is asked of us.” The blush on her cheeks had deepened, but this time it was through anger rather than embarrassment.

“So, if you were given a free choice, you would not consent to this marriage?”

“Of course I wouldn’t. Why would I agree to give myself over to a monster like you?”

Well, well. This little kitten had sharp claws. Although I didn’t care who I married to cement this alliance, it was clear this girl would do anything not to marry me. I liked her open defiance—it would make her all the sweeter to break.

“But you, as a man, can say no. No one will think any worse of you if you say that you don’t want to marry me.”

“I’m not going to let you get away from me that easily. Where would be the fun in that?” My voice was hard, and I tried to not let her rile me. After all, I was marrying her for power, not love. There was the added bonus of having a beautiful girl in my bed and someone to produce heirs for me, but those things were not my priority. The only thing that mattered to me was forging the alliance and increasing my power.

She went to turn away.

“Not so fast,” I said, making her inhale sharply as I gripped her arm hard. “I haven’t given you the ring yet. After all, that is expected of us.”

Her blue eyes blazed, although she relaxed her arm slightly when she realized I intended nothing more than to give her the ring.

I took her hand. It was so small in my much larger one, emphasizing her fragility to me. I saw the slight tremor in her fingers, and although she was

trying hard to hide her fear of me, she wasn't succeeding. But I had been trained to notice every nuance of body language because even a subtle action could tell so much about an enemy's intention. And until we were married, she was still the enemy.

I looked at her for a few moments, and then, with my other hand, I reached for the ring in my pocket. I slid the large diamond onto the ring finger of her left hand. I felt satisfaction when I saw that it fitted perfectly, as it should have given that her family had told me her ring size beforehand.

I kept her hand tightly in mine while I admired the ring, before looking back up at her. "Now you belong to me."

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CHAPTER 3

JULIANA

I looked at the obscenely large ring.

The emerald-cut diamond was surrounded by smaller diamonds and set on a band of platinum. If I hadn't been so overwhelmed, I might have been more impressed with it.

Danger rolled off the man standing in front of me, filling me with unease. I snatched my hand away. "If that's all, I should get back to my family."

The corner of his mouth rose in a smirk. "We should kiss to close the deal."

I couldn't stop a gasp from escaping. "You know that I can't kiss anyone before my wedding. My father will slit your throat if you try otherwise."

He chuckled, and I thought that was how the devil probably sounded. I looked carefully at the man I was supposed to marry. He was much taller than me, and underneath his suit I could tell that he was pure muscle. Even though he laughed, his symmetrical features remained hard and alert, and his good looks made him seem even more dangerous for some reason.

He had dark hair and gray eyes—stormy eyes which made me shudder with their cold, calculating gaze. They say the eyes are the window to the soul, but I doubted he even had a soul.

Without question, he was handsome—one of the most beautiful men I'd laid eyes on. A ripple rushed through me at the feel of his gaze on me. But whatever that ripple was, it was drowned out by the waves of menace that rolled off him into the thick air between us.

As my emotions ran riot, the only thing I was sure about was that this man frightened me.

He let me push past him so that I could leave the room. And I was thankful for that as my heart thudded much too fast. Instinct told me this man didn't care about the rules of our world—that it wouldn't take much before he just seized whatever he wanted.

We returned to the other guests, and then it was time to sign the contract. Marco and I went into the office together with my father and Emanuel.

I had never liked this room. I was only ever summoned into my father's office when he had cause to reprimand me, usually for cursing or some other unladylike behavior. The dark wood-paneled walls had always seemed foreboding as if they held sinister secrets that were not allowed to be unleashed. Today this office felt like my prison cell: once I signed the engagement contract, promising my body and soul to Marco Marchiano, there would be no escape.

My future husband was dressed in a black Brioni suit with a black dress shirt and a black tie. Brioni and black: the typical Mafia uniform. No doubt he had also arrived in a black SUV. How fitting it was that he wore black, given that it may as well have been my funeral today.

“Juliana, come sit down,” my father said, his voice falsely cheerful. I wasn’t fooled by his tone. I could see the hardness in his eyes, and I knew that this was work for him. Everything my father had done in his life was for the sake of business: marry my mother, have children, kill enemies, barter away his daughter.

“So, everything is settled between you two now and you have the ring,” stated my father, smiling with pleasure. He expected full obedience from me and would accept nothing less.

Emanuel joined in with an icy smile. “That just leaves the matter of the contract.”

I turned my head and glanced toward the door. My mind told me to bolt from this room and run as far away as possible; however, terror kept me rooted to my seat.

Emanuel pushed the contract across to my prospective husband. “I trust you’ll find everything in order. Your lawyers communicated that you are satisfied with the contract we have drawn up, and we incorporated the amendments you requested. As agreed, the wedding will take place in two months’ time.”

Marco was standing beside me. I watched as he picked up the pen and signed the contract on the appropriate line. He then slid the contract across to me.

I slowly reached for the pen. My hand trembled, but I no longer had the strength to steady it and put on a brave façade. I swallowed the lump in my

throat, determined not to cry. That would be the ultimate weakness.

I looked down at the contract, but it felt as though everything had stopped and I couldn't think. At that moment I knew that my father was the only one that could help me. He might be a Made Man, but I was his daughter. He was the only one I could turn to now.

"Father…?" I didn't even know what I was asking.

"Even your father can't save you now," Marco said with a twisted smile.

My father came and stood beside me and pointed to where I needed to sign. He rested his hand on my shoulder, gripping too tightly. "Juliana, you need to sign the contract."

Everyone in the room was watching me, their eyes burning into me. This was just the first humiliation of many. In two months' time there would be the wedding ceremony and reception. Then I would be expected to bleed on my wedding night and, even worse, produce the bedsheet for everyone to see the following morning.

I knew that in line with the Sicilian tradition of *cunzata del letto*, the bed would be prepared with the 'virgin sheet'. The virgin sheet could not be touched by married women; instead, just before the wedding, four unmarried girls would make up the bed with pure white, hand-embroidered sheets. They would also sprinkle rice between the sheets as good luck for the new bride's fertility.

Tradition further dictated that on the morning after the wedding, the husband would hang the bloodied virgin sheet out on a balcony. This was insisted upon by the families to prove that the bride had been a virgin on her wedding night and that the marriage had been consummated.

If the marriage wasn't consummated, then it could be annulled. And an annulment would be a disaster, given that the marriage was a strategic

business arrangement between the two families.

The Mafia still followed this vulgar tradition of insisting on the virgin sheet—they loved anything to do with blood.

“Sign, Juliana,” commanded Marco.

I swallowed hard. Everyone knew that I did not want to marry him—but no one cared.

I blindly signed the contract, abruptly pushing back my chair and turning to leave as soon as I finished my signature.

Before I could walk away, Marco seized my arm, holding me firmly in place.

“Let me go,” I hissed at him. “You’ve got what you wanted so I’m no longer needed here.”

“I didn’t say that you could go yet.” His jaw was tightly clenched.

I hesitated for a second, my mind scrambling, before turning my head toward my father. “Father, may I be excused please?”

“It’s no longer your father’s decision,” Marco said, glaring down at me. “You belong to me now, and I decide what you can and can’t do.”

I looked in horror toward my father, but he merely nodded. “He’s right. You are his now that the engagement contract is signed, and no matter what happens, our promise of you to him is irrevocable.”

There were tears threatening to spill from my eyes, but I held them back with the last ounces of my strength. I slowly turned my head back toward Marco.

Neither of us said a word. I knew that this wasn’t a battle I could win.

Through the lump in my throat, I squeezed out the words. “I’d like to go now.”

He said nothing for a few seconds, his gray eyes piercing me. “You can leave. I have business to discuss.”

Then he finally let go of my arm. I couldn’t get out of my father’s office fast enough, practically running in my haste to get away from him.

On my way back to my mother and sister, I ran into Gabriel Santino.

Gabriel looked at me, concern evident in his arresting blue eyes. “Juliana, are you alright?”

I nodded but couldn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry, Juliana. I only found out about my father’s plan the day before he told you. There was nothing I could do to stop it.” Gabriel understood that no girl would want to be faced with the task of marrying a member of the brutal Fratellanza, let alone its Capo.

“I never imagined that I would be married off to someone like *him*,” I said in a shaky voice.

It had always been expected that I would eventually marry Gabriel, with the aim of strengthening the ties between the two most powerful families in the organization. The gossips, however, liked to find more superficial reasons for such a bond: I was one of the few girls within the Società who had blue eyes, and so the gossips had speculated for years that we would be promised to each other, thinking that such a match would produce the most adorable blue-eyed babies.

“You don’t deserve to be married to a man like him,” Gabriel said in a low voice. “Just know that I will always be here for you if you ever need me. The Società will still be your family, no matter what else happens.”

I looked into his eyes, but there was nothing more either of us could say. We both knew that our lives were bound by the rules of the Mafia world and had been since the day we’d been born.

With a small nod at him, I walked away and headed back to the drawing room where my mother and sister waited for me.

“Come sit, Juliana, and tell me everything that was said. Do you think he approved of you? Did you both sign the contract?” My mother pressed me eagerly for all the details, oblivious to my despondency.

I looked at Jessica, who gazed at me in sympathy and put her hand on mine to console me. “Don’t worry. You only have the dinner to get through now.”

When it was time for the celebration dinner, the meal passed without incident. My mother had gone to huge efforts to put on a feast fit for kings, but I could only toy with my meal of roast beef. “Are you not hungry, Juliana?” asked Jessica quietly.

“I can’t face food right now,” I whispered back. “I just want this day to be over.”

The men talked business while my mother, Jess, and I kept quiet. Thankfully, I was spared from any further conversations with Marco Marchiano.

When he left with his brothers at the end of the evening, I knew that the next time I would see him would be at our wedding—and that thought absolutely terrified me.

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CHAPTER 4

JULIANA

After the announcement of the engagement, my mother made me go to Confession twice a week. She wanted nothing to jinx this wedding, and she wasn't going to take any chances.

As if I'd have anything to confess anyway. I was a Mafia daughter—I wasn't allowed to do or say anything to get into trouble.

In the weeks leading up to the wedding day, my mother relished her role as mother of the bride.

"Mother is in her element making all the wedding preparations," observed Jessica.

"I know. To be honest, I couldn't care less about the arrangements, but I guess it's good that she doesn't feel the same or nothing would get done," I said without humor.

Even picking out the wedding dress was not the dream I had thought it would be when I was a little girl. Those were the dreams of an innocent girl, unaware of the harsh realities of the Mafia world.

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A couple of days before the wedding, my mother was adamant that I get my nails done. I didn't see what difference it would make, but my mother insisted that everyone would be looking at my every detail. My mother demanded that everything be perfect for this wedding, and it was easier to just go along with her rather than argue.

After lunch, Jacob came to collect me for my appointment at the beauty salon. Jessica and I always had to go everywhere with protection, and Jacob tried as often as possible to be the one to accompany us on such outings. Despite being born into this life, I'd never quite gotten used to the requirement of having bodyguards around us all the time.

I was waiting for him in the dining room and turned when I heard him come in.

"Hey, you," he greeted me.

"Hey, Jake."

He slung his arm around my shoulder and pulled me in for a quick hug. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," I said, picking up my purse and looking up at him.

We walked out to his car. "How are you doing? Are you feeling okay about the wedding?"

"As okay as I can," I said quietly.

He looked hard at me. “Don’t worry, Juliana, I’ll be there on the day and I’ll make sure that everything goes right for you.”

“Thanks, Jake,” I gave him a small smile, but as we both knew, it was the part after the wedding that I was worried about.

He held the door open to his Mercedes convertible, waiting for me to get in, before closing the door after me.

I knew he was respected and feared as a Made Man and that our men believed he would make a good Underboss one day; however, he was always careful to hide his darker side when he was at home. He’d make a good catch for some Mafia daughter, I thought to myself.

He was the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, and he had the same piercing blue eyes as me. He was wearing a dark suit, his suit jacket hugging his toned muscles, and a dress shirt without a tie. Girls were always admiring his good looks, and I knew he had no shortage of females throwing themselves at him at the nightclubs owned by the Società.

He got into the driver’s seat and started the ignition. “Got your seatbelt on?” he checked with me before driving off.

“Yes, of course,” I said with an exasperated sigh, although not being able to help a small smile at the same time. He was overprotective like most Mafia men, but thankfully not overbearing.

As he drove, he flicked his gaze over to me as I fiddled with the strap of my purse. “I can’t stand the thought of you being in Chicago after you’re married, Juliana. How the hell am I supposed to protect you when you’re in another organization’s territory?” he growled. “I should have done more to stop Father from agreeing to this madness in the first place.”

“It’s not your fault, Jake. Nothing would have changed Father’s mind. He won’t let anything come between him and the success of the Società, not

even the safety and wellbeing of his own daughter." I couldn't help the trace of bitterness in my voice.

"Goddamnit," he cursed furiously. "The only thing we can do now is to pray that the truce between the Società and Fratellanza lasts."

Because if it didn't, I would be an outsider left in enemy territory. I shivered at the thought.

Jacob reached across and placed his hand over my cold one, trying to console me, although we both knew that my fate now lay in the hands of a monster.

When we arrived at the salon, Jacob parked right in front of it, ignoring the 'No Parking' sign. Most of the cops in the city were in the back pocket of the Società, so he didn't have to worry about minor inconveniences like parking tickets.

He got out of the car, scanning the immediate area for any potential threats, before opening my door and waiting for me to step out of the car. He put his hand lightly at my elbow and led me into the salon. "One of our soldiers is guarding the back entrance. I'll wait in the car—I can see everything from there and I've got some calls to make."

He could have come in and sat on the 'man couch', an area for guys to wait while the women had their treatments. If you were a normal girl, the waiting guy would be your bored boyfriend. However, if you were a Mafia girl, the waiting guy would be your bored bodyguard.

After getting my nails done, Jacob took me for my shift at the dog shelter. I volunteered once a week and today was going to be my last shift.

Mother would be furious if she realized that I'd come here straight after having my nails done. However, she was satisfied that Jacob was guarding

me for the afternoon, and she was too preoccupied with last-minute wedding details to take much notice of me apart from that.

When I arrived at the dog shelter, I headed straight to see Honey. She was a golden Labrador who had been at a shelter for a few months now. Her owner had died, leaving her without a home, so a neighbor had brought her into us.

Honey had been heartbroken after her owner's death, and we had struggled to get her mood to pick up. People coming into the shelter looking for a dog to rehome tended to go for the friendlier dogs, so they had steered clear of Honey who hadn't been willing to engage with anyone. I had been so nervous about her future and who would want her.

It had only been when a litter of abandoned puppies had come in that Honey had perked up. One of the puppies, Scamp, always wanted to snuggle up to Honey, and she had started mothering him and taking care of him. That had been what had finally brought her out of her depression—she had a purpose in life and someone to love again and to love her back.

After that, it had been decided that Honey and Scamp would only be rehomed as a pair. A young couple had now chosen them to be part of their family and they were picking up both dogs later today.

It was outcomes like this that had made me love my work at the shelter.

I loved animals and had even looked into college courses to become a veterinary nurse, but I always knew in the back of my mind that my father would never allow it—not when I was worth much more to him as a bargaining chip for a potential alliance.

At the end of my shift, I said goodbye to all the staff and dogs.

I was determined not to cry, but I wasn't able to hold back the tears, especially when saying goodbye to Honey. I'd grown close to her and

would miss not seeing her every shift. My work had been a little window of normalcy in an otherwise constrained life. I would miss it very much.

After one last wave at everyone, Jacob started up his car and saw me safely home. He always looked out for Jess and me, and we were grateful for that.

I couldn't imagine what life was going to be like living in Chicago—without my siblings, away from all the people I loved.

***

On the morning of the wedding, I was woken up far too early by my mother who was bubbling over with excitement.

She ripped open my curtains. "What are you doing still asleep? It's a wonderful sunny day, the perfect day for a wedding! It's time to get up—there is so much to do to get you ready for your husband."

I groaned and covered my eyes, whether in response to the bright sunlight streaming through my bedroom windows or because of the thought of what lay ahead today, I wasn't quite sure.

My mother carried on with her babbling, oblivious to my subdued mood. "I said to your father how lucky we were to get the church booked for a Sunday. You know that is the day we Italians believe to be the luckiest in regard to prosperity and fertility."

The Marchiano and Bonardi families were already prosperous and wealthy, thanks to their less-than-legal dealings. And given the absolute necessity for me to produce a male heir for my husband, no one had argued

against having the wedding on a Sunday, and I had no doubt that my father's large donation to the church had smoothed the way to a Sunday suddenly becoming available. Money could do anything in our world and if that didn't work, then it was easy enough to resort to violence.

Soon everyone was fussing around me, and I was surrounded by a whirlwind consisting of my mother, sister, aunts, and cousins. They were all here to help me get ready, along with the attentions of a professional beautician and hairdresser.

I looked over to my cousin's four-year-old daughter who would be my flower girl today. She was skipping around my bedroom, giggling her adorable laugh while playing hide and seek with Jessica, her playfulness lightening my mood.

My mother pushed me into the bathroom to take a bath and insisted on pouring an over-generous amount of scented oils into the water. "You should smell special for your husband on your wedding night—he will appreciate all the effort you make for him." I highly doubted he'd even notice, just so long as he got what he wanted tonight.

After bathing, it was time for a leg, underarm, and bikini wax. "Men don't have to go through this torture on their wedding day," Jess commented, wincing while she watched the beautician wield her waxing strips.

"No, they just have to bleed on their initiation day when they become a Made Man," replied my mother.

"And women are made to bleed on their wedding night," my aunt chimed in, with a bitterness to her tone.

I knew that my face showed horror and embarrassment at that comment. Seeing this, my mother quickly steered the conversation toward the

innocuous topic of the flower arrangements.

“Are you okay?” Jess whispered.

I nodded. “I’m as okay as I can be. Of course I know what’s expected of me tonight, but that doesn’t make it any easier. I doubt a man like Marco Marchiano will show me any kindness or mercy.”

Jess squeezed my hand in understanding. She and I confided everything to each other, and we had talked about this already.

After I had put on the dress, I looked at my reflection in the mirror, slightly in awe of what I saw. “I have to admit this wedding dress is perfect,” I said to Jess. The silk dress was overlaid with intricate lace and the fitted bodice was nipped in at the waist before flaring out into a long, elegant skirt.

“Don’t forget your jewelry,” said Jess, handing me the pieces I had selected for today. So as not to take anything away from the dress, I had decided to wear only a simple pair of diamond earrings, along with a diamond pendant necklace that had been a gift from my parents on my eighteenth birthday.

“Jess, will you help me with the veil?” With my sister’s help, together we fixed the veil in place on top of my dark hair. The lace veil was sheer and light and floated around my body, quite unlike the heavy feeling which was weighing down inside of me.

Looking at myself in the mirror was surreal: I was dressed up for this elaborate day and I looked perfect in every sense, yet somehow I didn’t look like me, nor did I feel like me.

My thoughts were interrupted by my mother bustling back into my bedroom with a large box in her hands. “Your bouquet has arrived from your groom,” she gushed excitedly. As was the Italian tradition, my bouquet

was a gift from my husband-to-be. I tentatively opened the box and saw the blood-red roses—his choice, not mine—and the sight of them caused a shiver to run through my body.

My mother turned to my sister with an uncomfortable look. “Jessica, I need to have a word with Juliana alone.” Jess left the room, giving me a knowing look, and I prepared myself for the mother-to-daughter talk I knew I would have to endure.

I had attended a Catholic school referred to as the ‘Polo School’—although we never called it that in front of the adults because they claimed this abbreviation was disrespectful. The school’s full name was Our Lady Of Pompei’s School, but the students had always reversed the initials of the school to give it the nickname of the Polo School, the latter being less of a mouthful.

Most of the daughters from Società families were sent to this all-girls school. Even though I had attended a Catholic school, of course I knew about sex. The very fact that the nuns wouldn’t talk about sex during our biology lessons had made the girls at my school even more eager to learn about the taboo subject.

My mother stroked my dark hair, which the hairdresser had put up in an elegant style with a multitude of hairpins. “My eldest daughter is getting married,” she sighed. “From the moment you were born, everyone knew that you would be a great beauty and that one day you would make a great marriage.”

My mother sounded wistful but then appeared to mentally shake herself as she remembered what she needed to say to me. “Today, you must do your duty to your family and the Società. Tonight, you must obey your husband. Try to please him and that will make it easier for you.”

Her words were hardly reassuring me.

She focused her gaze on the wall beyond me. “The physical side of the marital relationship is always hard on the woman. You must endure your husband’s attentions until he is satisfied with the number of children you have produced. After that, hopefully he will look elsewhere for intimate diversions. But be sure that you never refuse him. It would not be wise to cross any Made Man, but that is doubly true for a man like Marco Marchiano.”

She stroked my cheek and then, with a small sigh, she got up and walked to my bedroom door. “I must go to the church now and greet our guests. It is expected of me.”

Once she had slipped away, Jess came back into my bedroom along with my older brother, Jacob.

“Wow. You look…amazing,” exclaimed Jacob. He came over and gave me a hug. He was being careful not to crease my dress, but I pushed myself into his arms, relishing his closeness. He had always taken care of Jess and me, but I would no longer have him nearby once I moved to Chicago.

“I still can’t believe that they’re marrying you to that evil bastard,” cried Jess.

“Don’t curse,” Jacob and I scolded at the same time.

Jess scowled. “You and Jake curse all the time.”

Jacob raised his eyebrows. “We’re older than you. And you’re my baby sister, so I don’t think I’m ever going to let you curse.”

I giggled. I would miss this, and I would miss them—more than life itself.

Even though she was my little sister, Jess was only a year younger than me. At already eighteen years old, thoughts would soon turn to who Jess

would be married to. The thought filled me with unease, and I found myself wishing that I could protect her forever.

“Jake, make sure you take care of Jess for me,” I whispered, blinking hard to keep back the tears that were prickling behind my eyelids.

“Always,” he promised, and the three of us hugged for what felt like the last time. Jacob held out a hand each to Jess and me. “Come on, its time. Let’s get you two down to the car.”

With that, I took one final look around my childhood bedroom, before making my way down to the waiting car.

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CHAPTER 5

MARCO

I stood at the altar in the L.A. church chosen by the Bonardi family.

It was suitably old and imposing, though I hardly took any notice of my surroundings, having more pressing matters on my mind.

Alessio stood by my side as my best man, although his most important role for today concerned security. “Our side of the church looks rather empty,” observed Alessio.

“I know. But the alliance between the Società and Fratellanza is still in its infancy. Apart from our soldiers, it’s best that the only people attending from our side of the family are our siblings.” I had three brothers and one sister, and they had come to L.A. with me today.

Alessio was twenty-six years old and just one year younger than me. He was just as good a shot and fighter as me and could take care of himself.

Even Camillo, at eighteen years of age, was initiated into the Fratellanza and knew how to defend himself.

I couldn't help worrying, though, about my two youngest siblings, Danio and Debi. "I know Danio is fifteen already and next year will be initiated into the Fratellanza, but I can't stop thinking of him as a kid, especially as he's still in high school."

"I know," frowned Alessio. "I'd feel better if he and Debi had been able to stay home in Chicago today, but it would have looked odd if they didn't attend the wedding."

Debi was the baby of the family. She was fourteen and her four older brothers were determined to keep her as innocent as possible, for as long as possible. Our whole lives revolved around keeping her safe from the dangers of our world. With both our parents dead, it would have looked strange if my siblings had not attended the wedding today—it would look as though we didn't trust the Società Mafia.

Although both sides knew the other didn't trust them, neither would say it outright and we had to try and keep up appearances if this alliance was to succeed. Lately the Russian Bratva had been causing a lot of difficulties for both us and the Società. An alliance would strengthen us in the fight against the Russians and be to our mutual benefit.

My thoughts drifted to my bride. I hoped that Juliana would not have to be prompted to make her vows today. If she showed any defiance, she would be sorry tonight—her family would no longer be able to protect her.

I looked across at Alessio who had nervous energy bounding off him. "Is everything in place?" I checked with him quietly.

"Yes, everything is arranged and confirmed. I've made extensive contingency plans involving security, escape, and exfiltration options,

should the need arise.”

My brother, Alessio, wasn’t convinced about the proposed alliance between the Fratellanza and the Società. He said that I didn’t always think things through, but I preferred to think of it as being unpredictable to our enemies. And the proposed alliance, with a rival Mafia family whom we were known to despise, had definitely taken the Russians by surprise.

Alessio liked to consider things from all angles, while I was more erratic in my tactics. He liked control, while I thrived on chaos. Which is probably why our partnership as Capo and Consigliere had been so successful and had propelled the e hadn’t to

I looked around the church. Debi was sitting in the pews, in between Danio and Camillo. She gave me a little wave and I winked back at her. She looked really pretty in her dress today and she was very excited about the wedding. At least that made one of us.

There were noises at the other end of the church, and then the music started, and the large wooden doors opened. I looked up expectantly, waiting for my bride to appear.

A flower girl, who looked to be about four or five years old, proceeded down the aisle, scattering rose petals as she went along. Another girl, whom I recognized from the engagement party as Juliana’s sister, was a bridesmaid and she followed closely behind, making sure to keep the flower girl on track when the young child quickly started to lose concentration.

Then Juliana appeared on the arm of her father. Her white lace dress emphasized her innocence and made her seem even more fragile than when I’d met her the first time. Even with the veil over her face, I could see her bright blue eyes as she made her way down the aisle and came closer to me.

She gripped her father's arm tightly, and I could see her knuckles were white. She was holding on for dear life. As she walked toward me, she kept her eyes straight ahead and avoided my gaze.

When they reached the altar, her father lifted her veil and revealed her face to me. I held out my hand, and Cecilio placed Juliana's hand in mine.

As I closed my fingers firmly around hers, her eyes darted to mine. She quickly looked away, but I didn't miss the anxiety in her features nor the icy coldness of her hand in mine.

The Catholic priest began the wedding service, and I looked across at Juliana again. She continued to avoid meeting my gaze, filling me with an irrational anger.

After addressing the congregation, the priest turned to Juliana and me. "Marco and Juliana, have you come here to enter into marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?" An inappropriate question given the circumstances, but even the Mafia couldn't change the words required by the Catholic religion.

"I have," I said, and turned to Juliana.

She kept her eyes forward and her voice quiet as she replied, "I have." I felt a swell of satisfaction that I hadn't needed to force the words out of her.

"Are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his church?"

We both replied, "I am."

"Since it is your intention to enter the covenant of holy matrimony, join your right hands, and declare your consent before God and his church," decreed the priest.

As I turned toward Juliana, I saw out of the corner of my eye the little flower girl running behind us and Jessica going to grab her.

In that split second, a gunshot rang out across the church.

I saw Jessica fall to the ground.

And at once all hell broke loose.

I automatically drew my gun knowing that my brothers and soldiers would be doing the same. We never went anywhere without our weapons, not even to a wedding. I could see the Società soldiers brandishing their own guns.

That bullet had been meant for me.

It had been meant for me, but Jessica had gotten caught in the crossfire. As I aimed my weapon, I pushed Juliana to the ground behind me and tried to shield her with my body.

Screams and gunshots rang out and my gaze swung to Debi. Danio was already pulling her out of the church.

Women and children hit the floor as they had all been trained to do from a young age while the men exchanged gunfire.

The wedding had been a trap.

Fury had taken over my body and was driving my actions.

The Società wanted me dead and had used Juliana to lure me to L.A. today.

Here I was more vulnerable than if I were in my own territory of Chicago. My organization would be substantially weakened if I was killed —and the Società had probably planned to take out my brothers today as well.

Once I saw that Debi had reached safety outside the church, I grabbed Juliana and dragged her to her feet and out of the church with me.

“What are you doing?” screamed Juliana.

“We need to get out of here!” I pulled her behind me and half dragged her out of the church.

Outside I shouted at Camillo. “Protect Debi. Don’t let her out of your sight!” I saw him bundle her into an SUV with him and Danio.

Juliana struggled as I pushed her into another SUV. “Let me go!”

I remember her saying those exact same words to me in her father’s office after signing the engagement contract—I hadn’t let her go then, and I wasn’t letting her go now.

“Jess was shot! I need to make sure that she’s alright. I need to be with her.” Juliana was more worried about her sister than herself and her eyes reflected the shock she was in. Her voice became higher and her tone more pleading. “I need to stay with my sister. Please don’t do this. Please!” she cried, looking back toward the church.

But it was no good. Perhaps I should have felt some guilt at what I was doing. But I wasn’t a good man. I was a Made Man.

She had signed the contract.

She had signed herself over to me.

She was mine now.

And I was never letting her go.

I saw Alessio dragging the body of one of our injured soldiers out of the church. He pushed him into another vehicle and then ran over to our SUV and got into the driver’s seat.

The injured had been all loaded into vehicles now and we needed to get them medical attention ASAP. I could see our soldiers getting ready to go on my signal.

Once I was sure that Camillo’s vehicle had safely moved off, I told Alessio to hit the gas. Through a cacophony of shouts, slamming car doors,

squealing tires, and the roar of adrenaline in my ears, we sped away from the carnage at the church.

“I’ll tell Camillo and Danio to head to the private airfield to the west of the city. That will be our best bet for escaping L.A.,” said Alessio, as I reloaded our weapons with more ammunition.

I nodded in agreement. “I’ve already ruled out the city airfield as that’s more likely to attract the attention of the FBI. Even with our backhanders to the FBI, they won’t ignore a shootout in the middle of the city which could pose a significant danger to the civilian population.”

“The airfield to the north of the city is out of the equation too. It’s too easy for the Società to cut us off en-route there.”

Alessio had multiple planes on standby, providing us with different exfiltration options in a fluid situation such as this.

“A couple of Società vehicles are on our tail,” said Alessio as he checked the rearview mirror.

I glanced over my shoulder. “We need to lose them.” I pulled out my gun. Lowering my window I took aim at their tires, at the same time trying to dodge their bullets.

Both our cars and theirs would have bulletproof glass, but we could still aim for each other’s tires to derail the vehicle. I was the best shot in the Fratellanza, and together with Alessio’s defensive driving skills, I took out both Società vehicles, one by one.

As I reached for the ammunition to reload my weapon, Juliana dove for the car door handle, thrusting the door wide open as the SUV sped down the road.

I was too quick for her, seizing her arm and wrenching her back into the car, lunging across her to grab the door shut and shoving her back against

her seat.

“For fuck’s sake, lock the goddamn doors!” I shouted at Alessio.

“Christ, Marco, you need to get her under control! We need to focus on getting the hell out of L.A.”

She fought against me but I didn’t have time for her right now. “Don’t worry, I’ll deal with her,” I gritted out, my gaze fixed on the thrashing girl next to me.

I knew what had to be done.

I reached under the seat for the medical kit we kept in every vehicle.

I opened the kit, pulling out what I needed: a syringe.

JULIANA

As soon as I heard Marco say that he would deal with me, I shrank back against the seat and tried to get as far away from him as possible.

I knew that Jacob, Gabriel and the others would be trying to get me back, but once I was no longer in Società territory it would be much harder for them to rescue me and much more difficult to find anyone else to help me.

“Please don’t do this,” I pleaded, shaking my head from side to side. Terror was coursing through my veins—terror at what had just happened and terror at what was going to happen next.

But he continued to come toward me. And then I saw him take out a syringe. I felt the blood drain from my face.

The syringe in his hand made it difficult for him to restrain me with his one free hand, giving me a chance.

I couldn’t just give in. I struggled against his hold, kicking out my legs and hitting out with my arms.

Then he shoved hard at me, making me fall back so that I was lying down, sprawled across the back seat.

I tried to scramble up into a sitting position. But he twisted around and threw his leg over my body, straddling my hips with his muscled thighs and anchoring me to the seat.

I bucked my body violently under him. His weight was heavy, crushing me and forcing the air from my lungs.

The syringe was getting closer.

“Stop fighting,” he growled into my hair as he reached for me and grabbed my upper arms.

One of my hands managed to escape his grasp and I lashed out at him blindly, clawing my nails down his cheek.

He grimaced as he felt my nails gouge his skin open. “You shouldn’t have just done that,” he snarled, the aggression in his voice making my blood run cold. “You’re going to pay for this. You’re going to pay for everything that’s happened today.”

He restrained my arms in his hands. I frantically tried to evade his hold. But he tightened his grip and immobilized my arms which were flailing wildly and trying to push him away.

I knew that nothing could save me now. I was trapped—I had no way to escape him and no chance of overpowering him.

As I saw the needle advancing, my panic doubled. I tried to shrink my body away from him.

But I felt a sharp, cold prick at the base of my neck, and suddenly everything seemed to slow down, everything except for the cold panic that

was coursing through my veins.

But then even that slowed down, as everything went black.

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CHAPTER 6

MARCO

As soon as we reached the private airfield, we headed straight to the jet that Alessio had arranged to be fully fueled and on standby.

I had been in constant contact with my soldiers while on the way to the airfield and they were also heading back to Chicago.

“What’s the current situation?” asked Alessio, as he saw me hang up the phone to one of my soldiers.

I had to force the words out. “Three of our soldiers are dead, plus another two are seriously injured. Fuck, the Società bastards tricked us. They probably planned all along to kill us.”

Juliana was still unconscious as I got out of the SUV. I roughly scooped her body into my arms and pulled her against my chest. Her limbs were soft

and pliant against my hard body as I carried her onto the private jet, her face with its translucent skin looking serene like an angel.

Goddamnit, she had been the perfect screen to hide the Società's deadly plan behind. She had been their Trojan horse, and she had been part of this elaborate ploy to lie to me and deceive me.

The supposed wedding had been a cunning plan to get me and my brothers all away from the safety and protection of our home city.

As soon as I had put her in her seat, I went over to check on Debi. Her cheeks were stained with tears, and I felt my heart ache that she'd had to witness this 'bloody wedding' today. In our world, bloody weddings were rare but they existed—no one expected bloodshed at a Mafia wedding, but sometimes it was unavoidable when one side betrayed the other.

Debi was fourteen and I wished I could protect her forever. "Hey, shortcake, it's going to be alright." I held her in my arms, letting her cry against my chest. "It'll take more than a few bullets to get rid of me. We're okay now and I'm going to get you home. You're safe, we all are, I promise."

"I was so scared, Marco. I saw blood pouring out of one of the soldiers. He looked as though he might die. I just don't get why they did that," she sobbed.

There wasn't anything I could say to explain it to her. This was the way of our world.

Once Debi had calmed down, I got her settled into her seat.

"Well, I won't be giving the city of L.A. a five-star rating on TripAdvisor after today,' muttered Camillo from where he stood in the aisle of the jet.

"This wasn't supposed to be a goddamn holiday," I snarled.

“Aww, I was looking forward to seeing some of the sights. We never get to go to any other cities—you know, because we’re unwelcome just about everywhere,” complained Camillo.

“Why would you want to go to any other city?” My brother could be really goddamn irritating sometimes. “We’re the Kings of Chicago—and it’s the best fucking city in the world.”

I strode back to my seat. We were getting ready to take off as soon as we received the necessary clearance from the air traffic control.

As I sat down next to Juliana, I noticed that her arm was bleeding. She must have gashed it against something when I pushed her to the ground in the church—I would take a look at it when we were airborne. I would feel a lot better once we were no longer on Californian soil.

While we were waiting for take-off, Alessio came over to me. “What the fuck, Marco? We should leave her behind,” he said, signaling toward Juliana.

“She’s mine now, and she’s coming with us.”

“Christ, Marco, we’ve got Debi with us. They’ll come after us to get Juliana back. We need to get back to Chicago ASAP and having her with us is just asking for trouble.”

“We’ll be fine—we’re taking off soon.” I wasn’t in the mood for one of Alessio’s in-depth examinations of the pros and cons of a situation.

“And until then we’re sitting ducks while our plane is on the tarmac waiting for clearance to take off.

“I vote with Alessio,” chipped in Camillo.

“You don’t get a fucking vote,” I snapped at my brother.

“For God’s sake, Marco, we’re safer leaving her behind. Even Camillo agrees with me.” Alessio wasn’t letting this go.

“And what makes you think this is a fucking democracy?” I growled. “This is my decision as Capo. That’s final.”

I didn’t often pull rank on Alessio, but I barely had a handle on my emotions and I didn’t want to discuss this further.

After my brothers returned to their seats, I looked across at Juliana who remained unconscious. I couldn’t believe that I had allowed myself to be tempted by the beauty sleeping next to me.

Juliana was the Società’s version of ‘Pandora’, I thought, a bitter taste coating my throat. Just as Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, had caused the creation of the exquisite Pandora and then directed Hermes to fill her with lies and guile, the Società had molded Juliana into a beautiful siren. They’d offered her as a gift to me under the pretense of a marriage pact. But really, she had been a trick used to lure me into a trap, so that destruction and ruin could be unleashed upon the Fratellanza.

I was raging about the Società’s attack on us today, but I knew I was also furious that this girl was not what I had thought.

Then I had to remind myself that the only reason I had wanted to marry her was to gain power via the alliance and that getting her as my wife had been just a side benefit.

I looked down at the girl next to me, my gaze trailing over her body and ripped dress.

I wasn’t sure I liked her like this—a part of me preferred her when she was lashing out and fighting me.

The white fabric of her dress was splattered with drops of blood, probably from the gash on her arm. I ran my fingers over those droplets. Something about blood always got my adrenaline going, its bright red color calling to my senses, calling to the darker side of me.

Her expression was serene right now, almost angelic. But that wouldn't last, not when she came around and realized that she was now in my hold—that she was now my captive.

Her white dress screamed innocence; however, the red droplets of blood told me that this angel had been tainted by darkness today.

This was only the start. I would take her body and break her innocence—break that protective shell that had guarded her all her life from the cruelties of our world.

She might have the face of an angel, but she had the heart of a traitor.

She was supposed to be my wife. Now she would be my revenge.

***

We had been up in the air for a couple of hours when I heard a low moan from next to me and Juliana stirred in her seat.

She was coming around as the drug I had injected into her was wearing off. I turned toward her and saw her trying to open her eyes.

"Wh-what's happening?" she stammered as she tried to sit up. "Where… are we?"

I narrowed my eyes. "We're going home," I replied.

I saw confusion on her face as she looked around us and took in where she was. "Home?"

"Back to Chicago."

Panic filled her eyes, joining the confusion and terror that were already there. "I have to go back to L.A."

I turned away from her.

“I need to make sure Jess is going to be alright.” When I didn’t reply, her voice rose an octave. “Why are you doing this to me?”

I looked at her and saw the emotion shining in her clear blue eyes. And I hardened my heart. “You belong to me now. I’m taking you to your new home.”

“You’re crazy! I don’t belong to you.” She forced the words out despite her patent fear of me.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You signed the contract and therefore I own you now.” My voice was harsh.

“You can’t buy a human being through a contract,” she spat at me. “You can’t own me. That contract will never stand up in a court of law.”

“It doesn’t need to stand up in a court of law. It’s enforceable in our world—the Mafia world. You may be young, but you’re not naive. You know how things work, and you know that your family has to honor the contract, as do you.”

Her gaze faltered, as though she was trying to comprehend what had happened.

She was probably in shock, together with the drug still making her feel woozy, and my words had their intended effect as they dealt another hard blow to her.

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CHAPTER 7

JULIANA

I felt like I'd lost control of everything.

I looked out of the window of the jet, wondering if I could still see L.A.

But all I could see was the black darkness. It was so dark that I couldn't even see the stars.

I looked down at my hands, fisting them in a futile attempt to stop their shaking.

I hadn't been expecting a fairytale wedding today. But I also hadn't expected what had just happened: a bloody wedding. Of course I'd heard about them. But I had never experienced one and I had always hoped to God never to witness one, never mind have it happen on my very own wedding day.

A Mafia bloody wedding—the stuff of nightmares. When the families turned on each other, and the wedding turned into a slaughter. I still didn't understand what had happened and how Jess could have been shot.

I'd been kidnapped by a maniac, I thought, as a shudder ran through my body. I had expected to lose my family today when I moved to Chicago. However, I never thought that I might lose my sister in a shooting, nor my freedom.

By now, tears of fear and confusion were leaving a trail down my face as we flew through the night. I turned to Marco. "Do you know if Jessica…is she alive?" I forced the words out. It was as if saying them out loud made what had happened real.

He remained silent.

"Please just tell me that. Please just tell me if my sister is alright."

"I imagine she will be fine," he answered, clenching his jaw.

"How can you be so calm about it? My eighteen-year-old sister's been shot and in a church of all places."

"The whole fucking thing was planned by your precious Società. Therefore, they would have had a doctor on standby and she would have gotten medical attention straightaway. It didn't look as if the bullet hit a major blood vessel."

"What do you mean that it was planned by my family?"

Marco narrowed his gaze at me. "The shot your sister took was meant for me. This whole engagement and marriage were just a sham to lure my family to L.A. to take us out."

"You can't be serious?" I felt my face pale, and I was too shocked to even cry anymore. "My own family shot Jess?"

“Yeah, and you and your sister are just collateral damage in the whole shit-show.”

I was horrified, but I also knew I couldn’t trust anything a Marchiano said to me. My head felt as if it was splintering into pieces as someone hammered nails into it. I rubbed at my temples, not that it helped. I didn’t think there was anything that could help me to feel better at this stage.

Marco got up and disappeared to the back of the plane. I looked around and saw his brothers and sister seated further away from us. They didn’t say anything to me, obviously hating me because the Società was their enemy.

I sank back into the wide leather seat and closed my eyes, willing my head to stop pounding. I was glad that Marco had gone elsewhere in the cabin because I couldn’t bear to look at him right now.

Whatever he claimed, I knew that his men were definitely the ones that had shot Jess. My father would never endanger his own family by allowing a shootout at the church.

My mind was in turmoil. *The man I was supposed to marry had kidnapped me.* I had already been fearful that my new life with this man would be difficult, but now I was absolutely certain that my life with him would be a complete nightmare.

I was feeling drowsy, probably due to the drug Marco had injected me with, and I must have drifted off again because the next thing I felt was someone touching my arm.

I forced my eyes open to see what was going on.

Marco was bent over my arm. He had thrown me to the ground when the gunfire had started, and I remembered gashing it. He was inspecting my wound and feeling it gently with his fingertips. “You’re lucky. This won’t need stitches. I’ll clean it up for you and put a dressing on it.”

“Lucky? I don’t think anyone could consider me lucky after today,” I whispered.

I didn’t have the physical energy or mental strength to fight him anymore, so I just rested my weary head against the seat and let him treat my wound.

MARCO

She was a good actress, I’d give her that, pretending not to know about her family’s plan today. She was smart enough to pretend ignorance, but that wouldn’t save her now.

I examined her wound and then proceeded to clean it. It wasn’t a kindness. I didn’t want it getting infected—she would be of no use to me dead.

Although I loved the sight and feel of blood, I could tell by the look in her eyes that she didn’t feel the same.

It was a fairly minor injury, and it just needed cleaning up and then I’d keep an eye on it. I gave a twisted smile. “I like the sight of your blood. It gives me satisfaction to see you bleed.” I could feel her pulse beating much too fast under my fingers.

“Is that your plan? You’re going to hurt me just so you can see my blood?”

“This wasn’t intentional,” I said, nodding toward her arm. “But I can hurt you now whenever I like—because you are mine.”

She stiffened at my words, keeping her eyes on me, waiting to see what I was going to do to her.

As I cradled her slender arm in my large hands, I felt a desire to stroke her, to run my fingers over the sensitive skin on the inside of her wrist, up her delicate forearm, to the crease inside her elbow, and then let my fingers explore the rest of her.

Holding on to her arm, I looked up into her eyes and saw her swallow hard.

Gripping her arm in one hand, I used my other hand to open the medical kit I had grabbed on the way to my seat—Alessio had ensured that all the jets on standby were equipped with several such kits.

I found myself reluctant to clean up her wound, to wipe away her blood. I liked the look of her perfection being spoiled. I liked to see that she could be hurt.

I got the antiseptic out of the medical kit. Juliana hissed as I applied it to the open skin, and she tried to pull her arm back.

“Keep still. I need to clean this to stop it from getting infected,” I said severely, as I held her arm firmly in place.

I kept my eyes on her arm and focused on the task at hand. I could feel her eyes watching me. Once I had cleaned the wound, I applied a dressing. “That should do for now.”

Juliana pulled her hand away and rubbed at her temples.

Her head was obviously troubling her. I watched her and then handed her a bottle of water. “Here. Drink this. It will get rid of the headache faster.”

“I wouldn’t have a headache in the first place if you hadn’t drugged me,” she snapped at me.

I clenched my jaw. She was playing with fire.

Thankfully she said no more—my tolerance was by now at an all-time low. She slowly drank the water and then closed her eyes again, turning her

face toward the window, either to sleep or to ignore me.

A little while later the seatbelt sign came on as we encountered turbulence. I reached across Juliana who looked as though she had drifted off again. She jumped when she felt my arm across her and startled awake. “Don’t touch me.”

I pulled my hand away. “You need to put your seatbelt on. We’ve hit turbulence.”

When Juliana didn’t fasten her seat belt, I felt annoyance rise up in me that she had just ignored my instruction. If she couldn’t obey even a simple command like putting on her seatbelt, she was going to make things extremely difficult for herself in the days to come.

“Put your seatbelt on. Now,” I ordered.

“Why?”

“Because it will keep you safe.”

“Are you kidding me? Today I’ve been shot at, drugged, and kidnapped, and you’re worried about a fucking seatbelt?”

I didn’t have the patience to deal with her right now. “Do it. Or I’ll do it for you.”

With her mouth set in a rigid line, she buckled up her seatbelt. I guess she thought that preferable to having my hands near her.

Satisfied, I got up and went to talk to Alessio.

Debi seemed a bit less upset now. Danio had been trying to take her mind off what had happened today. Right now, she was curled up against his side, with his arm around her, and they were laughing at something on his phone. Those two were as close as two siblings could be. As the two youngest siblings they had gravitated toward each other, especially after Camillo was initiated and had gotten busy working with Alessio and me.

Danio was still in school like Debi, so they naturally spent a lot of time together. He was keen to be initiated into the Fratellanza, but we would wait until he was sixteen, like we had with Camillo.

Danio looked earnestly at Debi. “You know I would never let anything happen to you, right?”

“I know,” replied Debi. And with that she threw her arms around his neck. “I love you, Danio.”

He hugged her back. “Yeah, ditto.”

“Hey, have you seen the video of the cat skateboarding in the football stadium?” asked Debi, searching for another video on his phone. With that, the moment of seriousness was gone, and they went back to laughing and joking around.

I turned to Alessio. “Any update on how long until we land in Chicago?”

“Not long now. It’s probably about twenty minutes until we reach Chicago. The pilot said we’ve had a tailwind behind us and we’ve made good time.”

Good. We were nearly home, back on our own territory, in the city where I ruled.

Soon I would be showing my bride her new home.

And soon I would make her sorry that she ever thought she could trick me.

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CHAPTER 8

MARCO

It was late when we landed in Chicago. I stood up and looked at Juliana, but she made no move to rise.

A tear at the top of her dress revealed her slender shoulder and a glimpse of the swell of her breast. I felt my dick stir at the sight of her naked flesh. It would be fun to break in my defiant little virgin.

“Come on. Time to go.”

As she finally got to her feet and moved into the aisle of the plane, I could see that her legs were still wobbly. The drug had still not fully worn off, plus she looked shattered with exhaustion.

I steadied her with my arm, but she pushed it away. “I don’t need your help.”

“Whatever you say.” My voice was like granite as I took my arm away. Almost immediately she stumbled and would have fallen to the floor but for my catching her. “Stop being so stubborn. I’m trying to stop you from hurting yourself.” I gripped her arm as we exited the plane and went down the stairs to our waiting cars.

Camillo took Danio and Debi in one car. Alessio drove the second car and when we reached it, I opened the rear door. “Get in,” I instructed Juliana.

She looked as if she might disobey me and refuse, but she got in without an argument. However, after climbing into the car, she moved across the seat and sat as far away from me as possible. I’d let her have that for now.

The night had turned chilly. She hugged her arms around herself as she looked out of the car window. I could tell she was trying to identify landmarks and was probably already trying to plot an escape plan.

But now that I’d got her, I wouldn’t ever be letting her go.

***

No one said anything on the drive home. We drove down Lake Shore Drive, and the view of Lake Michigan filled me with calm for the first time today.

Today had been a nightmare and my family were finally safe now that we were back in Chicago, back in my empire.

When we reached the Marchiano estate, the guards at the perimeter opened the electric gates and we drove through. I could see Juliana trying to

see how many guards there were and probably also if they were armed.

Upon reaching the mansion, I got out and moved around to Juliana's side. I opened the door and reluctantly she stepped out of the car, looking up at the house. Her legs were still shaky, so I decided to pick her up and carry her inside. I put one hand under her legs and the other around her back, clutching her soft body against my hard one.

"Put me down! I can walk by myself."

I ignored her and instead grasped her more tightly to my chest as she struggled to free herself, thinking that I liked the feel of her body writhing against mine. "I'm supposed to carry my bride across the threshold of her new home."

"But we didn't actually get married, remember?"

"It doesn't matter. You signed the contract and you're mine now. I'll sort out a wedding for us soon enough." She blanched at my words.

When I got inside, I didn't put her down and instead carried her straight upstairs. I took her into the bedroom and put her down on the bed. I could see that she was trying to look brave, but I could still see the fear in her eyes. She knew I wasn't a good man.

"Get ready for bed. I'll be back." I stalked out of the room, and I locked the door behind me.

JULIANA

I heard the door click shut and then the sound of a lock turning. This was going to be my prison cell.

At first, I could only stand with my arms wrapped around myself, feeling my cold fingertips against my skin and shaking uncontrollably. Being locked in this room—in his bedroom—brought home to me that I was now his captive.

I was still feeling nauseous and my brain felt foggy, and I wasn't sure if it was due to the drug he injected me with or the terror I was feeling. Whatever the cause, I felt terrible. I tried to swallow down my panic, but it kept trying to take over my whole mind and body, wrapping its icy tentacles around my throat, making it feel like I couldn't breathe.

After attempting to calm myself for a few minutes, I got up and walked around the bedroom. I looked around myself and attempted to take in my surroundings. The room had been furnished in a masculine style and there was little to soften the room's hard feel. I tried to look around, but my eyes kept returning to the large bed.

Someone obviously slept in this bed. The nightstand on one side of it held a half-drunk bottle of water and a phone charger. The room had a hint of musk and lemongrass, just like the cologne Marco had worn today.

This was obviously his bedroom. And this was where I would be expected to sleep now. And do other things.

My wedding night was always going to be difficult, but now I was being held prisoner by a man who I hadn't even married.

I sat on the bed. My body ached with tiredness and my head was thumping. My eyes felt gritty from my earlier tears and my current exhaustion. I longed to put my head down on the pillow and fall into a deep sleep, but I knew that he wouldn't let me do that, not before he had claimed me.

I decided to distract myself and explore more before he came back. I went through a door which led me into an adjoining bathroom. I washed my hands and face in the hope that it might help clear my mind. The bathroom was luxurious, with a marble stone floor, dual vanities, a large walk-in shower and a huge bathtub. I looked around me, trying to take in my new cage and wondering if he was expecting me to make myself pretty for our wedding night.

I looked at my reflection in the vanity mirror. My eyes looked huge in my face and my skin was unnaturally pale.

I wandered back into the bedroom and decided to try the windows. But they were also locked. There was no way out.

MARCO

I headed back downstairs to check on my siblings. Alessio and Camillo were old enough and ugly enough to look after themselves. I wanted to make sure that Danio and Debi were okay though.

“Come on, shortcake, it’s time for bed,” I said to Debi, putting my arm around her.

“Go get ready and I’ll be up soon to tuck you in.” I had a few things to discuss first with Alessio.

We needed to get the security footage from the church to see exactly what had happened. No self-respecting church frequented by the Mafia went without CCTV these days.

Tonight, I also needed to visit in person the families of my dead soldiers. It was the last thing I felt like doing, but they deserved to hear it from me.

That was my duty as Capo.

I recited the words every Made Man said upon a death: "*Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte*." The meaning of those words was always so poignant: 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.'

The prayer was said as much for myself as for my dead soldiers.

Once I was done talking with Alessio, I went up to check on Debi. She was already asleep. I pulled the comforter up around her and kissed her gently on her forehead. I was livid at the Società for what they had made my little sister witness today. I took one last look at her and then headed out to visit the families of the dead soldiers.

JULIANA

After looking around the bedroom, I sank down into a velvet armchair that stood in front of the windows. My mind wouldn't stop racing as I tried to comprehend what had happened today and what would happen tonight.

I huddled into the armchair and wrapped my arms around myself. I suddenly felt cold and had goosebumps on my arms. I didn't know if it was because it was actually cold in here or if it was because of what would happen tonight in this room.

I could hardly keep awake and I longed to just curl up and sleep. But I knew that I needed to stay awake, to be prepared for when he returned.

I had always known that my marriage would be arranged and that it would be to a Made Man. It was forbidden to marry outsiders. In our world

we didn’t marry for love—we married according to our family’s tactical objectives.

I hadn’t expected a knight in shining armor to sweep me off my feet. But never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that I would be kidnapped on my wedding day by a heartless maniac.

All the stories I had heard while growing up about the horrifying brutality of the Fratellanza, ordered or carried out by Marco Marchiano, kept racing through my mind.

While we could never talk about such matters in front of outsiders, Mafia families liked nothing more than to gossip about these things among themselves. Dear Lord, would I be the next topic of gossip discussed by the wives of the Società Mafia during one of their coffee mornings back in L.A.? Would my name be mentioned in dramatic whispers, the wives pretending to be horrified and disgusted but at the same time secretly delighting in the new gossip they could speculate about and spread?

No matter how much I willed my brain to stop these thoughts, my mind kept spinning out of control, feeling like it was taking my sanity with it.

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I didn’t remember falling asleep. But I must have done because the next thing I knew, I felt muscular arms around me lifting me out of the armchair.

I jerked awake and tried to see what was happening. The sky outside was dark but someone must have switched on a lamp in the room.

My eyes hadn’t adjusted to the bright light, but I knew that my kidnapper was back.

And that he was expecting something from me.

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CHAPTER 9

JULIANA

“I’m taking you to bed,” he said in a hard tone.

His eyes were intense on my face, almost burning me with their gaze, searing the edges of the terror galloping through my body.

“No—I’m not sleeping in that bed with you.” I struggled against his grasp, trying to twist out of his hold.

He gave a twisted smile, making my stomach turn over. “We won’t be doing much sleeping. Anyway, you’re my captive. And captives don’t get a choice.”

“I’ll scream,” I threatened, saying the only thing I could think of as my mind scrambled frantically.

“Go ahead. As if anyone here would help you. Besides, I like a woman who screams.”

I felt the blood drain from my face, but I couldn't just give in to him, I couldn't just give in to whatever he had planned for me. I thrashed in his hold, kicking out with my arms and legs, trying to get away from him.

He tightened his grip around me, walking over to his bed and roughly throwing me onto it.

The moment my back hit the mattress I quickly turned around onto my hands and knees and clambered against the silk of my dress to the other side of the bed.

I got across the mattress and my feet swiftly hit the hard floor on the other side of the bed.

As I looked around feverishly, my gaze went to the door of the bedroom —I might be able to make it out of here.

"Don't even think about it, Juliana. There's nowhere you can run to." His voice was dark, unnerving me with its unspoken threats.

"I don't understand what you want with me, what you're going to do to me?"

"I'm sure you can imagine." His drawl made the hair on the back of my neck stand up as I watched his eyes glint at me.

"But we weren't married and I'm not your wife…do you expect me to be your whore?" My blood ran cold. "Surely you won't treat me like *that*?" I tried to appear brave, but I couldn't stop a shudder running through my body.

He just looked at me, not responding to me, as if whatever he had decided upon was a foregone conclusion no matter what I said, no matter how much I pleaded.

"You can't hold me responsible for the actions of the Società, for things done by your enemy which I had no control over?"

He prowled a couple of steps closer to me. “Can’t I? You must know that *you* are now also my enemy...and mine to punish however I see fit.”

I bolted for the door. I was hindered by my long dress and slowed down by my fear. I stumbled but managed to put my hand on the door handle and turn it.

My heart leapt into my throat and I cried out when his large fingers clamped down on my hand in an iron grip.

His other arm hauled me toward him, crashing my back into his chest before he bent his head to my ear. “You can’t escape me, beautiful. You should already know that, but it seems I may need to drive that message into you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut as his voice ominously caressed the shell of my ear.

“Come.” His hand seized my arm and yanked me away from the door.

I tried to take a gulp of air, but even breathing was difficult right now. I silently prayed that maybe he’d at least be gentle with me.

He led me over to the bed again. “Take off the dress,” he commanded.

I took a shaky breath. “No. I’m not taking my clothes off in front of you.”

He smirked. “We’ll see. I plan for you to be naked in this room a lot, for you to be lying on my bed with your thighs spread wide open and waiting for me.”

As he spoke, he ran his fingers softly over the gash on my arm, making me flinch as his hand sent needles of adrenaline piercing through my body. Every touch from him brought him closer to taking me and brought me closer to losing myself. He was out for revenge.

“Take your dress off. Do it—now. It would be a shame to have to mark your pretty skin if you keep defying me. It would be much more fun to

mark your tight pussy with my cum."

My cheeks flushed bright crimson as I shook my head at him. My fiancé, or supposed-to-be-my-husband-by-now or whatever he wanted to call himself, referring so crudely to sex was mortifying and terrifying in equal measure. "You disgust me."

My words had no effect on his plans. "You're not wearing that dress to bed. Take. It. Off."

He exhaled heavily when I didn't start undressing. "Turn around," he demanded. But my feet were frozen to the spot.

When I didn't move, he walked behind me. Towering above me, I held my breath as I felt his hands graze over my shoulders, jerking at the sudden contact from his fingers. I wanted to scream at him not to touch me, but I knew it would do no good and it wouldn't stop him.

He ran his fingertips down my neck and slowly unzipped my dress. I felt the cool air kiss my bare skin, the feeling starting at the base of my neck and spreading down the length of my spine as the back of my dress gradually fell open. He took his time, drawing out my torment and undoing me further.

I shivered. Maybe I should have just taken off the dress myself. That way I wouldn't have had to feel his hands on me now.

The dress pooled at my feet. "Step out of it," he ordered, as he held his hand out to me.

I looked warily at him, unable to reach out to the hand which would hurt me. Ignoring him, I instead wrapped my arms around myself, stepping over the heaped fabric of the dress.

I was left standing in my wedding lingerie—a matching white lacy bra, panties, and garter. I wished now that I hadn't let my mother insist on these

sexy items and had instead gone with my first choice of something plain and more substantial.

He ran his gaze over me in an assessing stare before he raised his hand to me again.

I recoiled from his impending touch, automatically retreating a step out of his reach.

But he snarled and stalked toward me, taking a step forward with every step I took back until my back painfully met the hard wall, a small cry escaping my tight throat.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you…yet.”

Time appeared to stand still, lengthening my dread. “Yet?”

I was trapped between the wall and his hard body. His hand reached down toward my panties. I bit my lip to stop a scream from escaping.

I felt his cool fingers skim over the lace of my panties and touch my thigh. Everything seemed to go into slow motion.

He ran his fingertips along my upper legs, stroking the softest part of my thighs between my legs, letting his touch linger, before roughly tugging down my garter and letting it fall to the floor.

I swallowed hard and I risked a look up at him to find that he was undressing.

He removed his gun holster first, laying it on top of the dresser. Undoing the top couple of his shirt buttons, he pulled it over his head and tossed it onto the armchair that I had been sitting on before. His arms were pure muscle and led up to powerful shoulders. His torso was toned, while his tanned olive skin was dusted with dark hair and scattered with scars from old injuries. It was clear that his body was ruthlessly fit and a deadly weapon.

I looked at the tattoos covering his back and one arm. These had been completely covered when he had worn a long-sleeved dress shirt. There was also a tattoo at the top of his left shoulder, depicting what I knew to be the symbol of the Fratellanza—a knife piercing a hand.

He kicked off his shoes and moved on to his dress pants, unzipping them and pulling them down to reveal strong, muscular thighs.

I couldn't stop myself from watching him. I felt a sheen of cold sweat between my breasts at the thought of how this man would punish me for the Società's wrongs. He was a killer and a murderer, and he would have no qualms about hurting me on what should have been our wedding night.

He stepped out of his pants and was left in only his boxer briefs, and as he turned around to throw his pants onto the armchair to join his shirt, I couldn't stop the panic rising up my body. It propelled my legs to run for the door again.

But he was too quick for me. Catching me, he wrapped his solid arm around the back of my legs and hauled me over his shoulder with a grunt, flipping me over his shoulder so swiftly that I felt the air whooshing out of my lungs as my torso slammed against his back.

I was drowning in his strength. He was stealing the oxygen from my lungs, the fight from my body, the sanity from my soul.

He carried me back toward the bed in a few long strides. The suddenness of his movements and the tightness of his grip around my body made me breathless. I tried to kick my legs free but he had them completely restrained with his arm, making it impossible for me to get out of his grip.

I drummed my fists onto his back, but my hands just connected with more hard muscle, and it was as if he hardly felt my blows. Arriving at the foot of the bed he flipped me back down and I tried to spin away from him.

“Stop struggling!” He grabbed both my arms and whirled me around to face him. His charcoal eyes were wild. “You need to learn how to obey,” he growled.

My breath was coming in heaving gulps now, but I still felt like I couldn’t get enough oxygen into my lungs as tears spilled down my face.

He released me. “Get into bed.”

I was paralyzed.

“I said, get into bed.”

But I couldn’t move. I could barely keep myself standing and it felt as though my legs were about to give way under me.

“This is the last time I’m going to tell you…” His voice was deadly quiet now, dripping with unspoken threat. “Get into that bed—now. We’re going to sleep.”

My mouth fell open. “We’re going to…sleep?” I stammered.

“Yes, sleep. It’s been a fucking long day and we both need to get some rest.”

“We’re going to get some rest?”

He reached behind me and turned down the comforter and sheets. “In.”

I hesitated, but having run out of options, I did the only thing I could and climbed beneath the cold sheets.

He turned off the lamp on his nightstand, shrouding us in complete darkness. My fear wouldn’t stop its rampage through my body—in the darkness the unfamiliar room seemed even more foreboding, as did the monster next to me.

MARCO

After breaking the news of my soldiers' deaths to their families, the last thing I felt like was consummating my relationship with Juliana.

Three men dead. Three faithful soldiers from loyal families who had long served the Fratellanza. Despite my hard front, I was not immune to the grief of their families. We would look after their dependents and they would have no financial worries, but nothing could bring back their loved ones. And their loved ones had been my responsibility. It had been my duty to protect the Fratellanza from our enemies.

But I had been deceived by the Società, fooled by their lies and blinded by my attraction to the beauty they had flaunted in front of me.

Fuck. They would pay, and she would pay, if it was the last thing I did.

I turned my eyes to Juliana. She had scooted across the bed and lay as far away from me as possible. I'd give her that much tonight. I didn't have a handle on my rage, and she was right to keep as far away from me as possible.

How easy it would be to fuck my anger out of my system, punishing her for her treachery and the Società's treachery. Once she had signed the contract, she had been mine, and she should have been loyal to me and me alone.

This little traitor could wait for now. There was nowhere for her to run to. She would receive her punishment soon enough.

It was dark in the room as I lay down in bed. She was faced away from me and laid rigidly on the edge of the mattress, obviously not trusting what I said to her about my intentions for tonight. I could tell she was trying to stay awake until I fell asleep—as if I might take advantage of her while she was sleeping. Not that it would be difficult to take her. Her wedding lingerie

had been chosen to arouse her husband—the wispy nothings made of lace were a complete tease, just like the girl laying next to me.

I listened to her rapid breaths slow down, and after a while, I heard her breathing change into the steady rhythm of sleep. The drug I had knocked her out with earlier would still be working its way out of her system and it would make her drowsy until tomorrow at least. I should have given her a lower dose, but the syringes we kept prepared in all our medical kits were dosed for their normal target of large strapping enemies, not small, fragile girls like her.

It was strange having someone sleep with me in my bed. I hadn't had anyone sleep the entire night in my bed since the kids had been young.

My chest ached as I remembered Debi and Danio sneaking into my bed when they couldn't sleep after our parents had died.

Debi used to slip quietly into my bedroom, clinging onto her fluffy toy puppy as I would lift her onto my bed. Debi had been five then and Danio had only been a year older than her. They used to come to my bed and cry themselves to sleep. I remembered how Debi's small body had snuggled into mine and shaken with sobs until she would fall asleep exhausted, still tightly holding onto her favorite toy. And for every one of those moments, I would berate myself.

She had been too young to have to deal with such loss. Her hands against me had been so small, and each tear rolling down from her huge brown eyes would kill me just a little bit more.

Trying to comfort the kids had never made the pain any less—either for them or for me. I knew that I hadn't deserved absolution from my sins, but I would have done anything if it meant my siblings hurting less.

When I was sure Juliana was asleep, I turned toward her and looked across at her face. This was the first time today that I'd seen her without worry on her face. I continued staring at her, looking at what was mine.

I should have taken her as my wife today.

But now I had taken her as my prize…and I would use her as my revenge.

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CHAPTER 10

JULIANA

I woke up and for a few seconds, it seemed as though it were any other morning of my life.

But then I stretched out in bed and felt the unfamiliar sheets around my body and my eyes flew open.

The memories of yesterday came crashing into my mind just as waves overwhelm the shore at high tide. Dear Lord, did yesterday really happen?

I looked down at my body clad in just my wedding lingerie, and I knew that my memories were a very real occurrence. My terror pushed away any exhaustion that lingered from yesterday. I let my gaze fall on the other side of the bed—it was empty. Marco must have already woken and, as I couldn’t hear any sounds from the adjoining bathroom, I assumed that he had left me here alone.

I tried to hold my anxiety inside me. I felt like screaming out, but I knew that wouldn't help me. There was nobody in this mansion to hear me except for the Marchiano's, and none of them would go against their Capo to help me.

Maybe it was better that Marco thought that I was still asleep? That way he wouldn't come for me just yet.

My brain started racing. Was he planning on using me as a bargaining chip? To trade me for money or territory?

Did he plan to rape me? Or kill me?

Would he use me until he got bored of me? Or would he just kill me straight away?

I had to stop these thoughts from going around my head or I was going to drive myself mad. My mind swiftly turned to Jessica, wondering—hoping—that she was still alive. I couldn't believe that I had been worrying about myself when my sister might already be dead.

I couldn't let my thoughts overwhelm me. I needed to take some control, or this situation would totally consume me.

I quietly got out of bed and wrapped one of the sheets around my exposed body—being in only my wedding lingerie made me feel too vulnerable. The hardwood floor was cool against my bare feet, but it wasn't that which sent a shiver through my body.

After considering my options for a few moments, I decided to put my wedding dress back on, even though the dress was ripped and had blood on it from where I had cut my arm. If Marco came back in, I might feel stronger if I wasn't half-naked when I faced him.

I got my dress on, but I could only get the back zipper up halfway. Jessica had helped me do up the zipper yesterday when I had first put the

dress on.

Yesterday—it felt like a lifetime ago that I had been in my bedroom getting dressed for my wedding day, with my little flower girl running around and giggling. I prayed to God that she too was alright and unhurt, and I desperately wished that I could just talk to my family to find out how everyone was and what was going on.

I was sitting on the bed when I heard the lock turn in the door and then the door slowly opened.

And there he stood. Marco Marchiano. His eyes held mine as he walked into the room and closed the door behind him, the door that I knew after last night there was no chance of my escaping through.

MARCO

Before I could say anything, she stood up from the bed and walked toward the bathroom. “I’m going to have a shower.”

“Not so fast.” I pushed her back onto the mattress.

Using one arm, she managed to catch herself in a half sitting, half reclining position. With her other hand she held up the bodice of her wedding dress which had its zipper undone. As she fell back onto the bed, she clasped at it more tightly. The folds of fabric were teasing me with glimpses of her lacy bra and the swell of her heavy breasts.

“I see you’ve put your wedding dress back on. Perhaps you’re hoping that we finish what we started yesterday?”

“In your dreams. Yesterday was a lucky escape for me.” She was attempting to appear strong, but she couldn’t hide her fear from me.

“Hardly an escape. You’re at my mercy here on my estate without the title of being my wife. You are a mere captive.”

“Being your wife wouldn’t allow me any additional privileges from a monster like you.” She had hatred in her eyes, but she knew little of real hate, having spent the entire nineteen years of her life cocooned and pampered by her family. I was twenty-seven now, but I had been initiated at the age of twelve into the Fratellanza, into a world of violence and death. There had been no idyllic childhood for me.

I looked at her in her wedding dress. “You’re rather fond of that dress, aren’t you? I have to say you looked stunning in it yesterday.”

She didn’t reply as I prowled closer to her. “When you walked down the aisle toward me, for one moment there you had me thinking that I was a lucky man to be getting such a beauty for my wife—to be getting such a body to give me pleasure in my bed.”

She flushed red at my reference to sex.

“But that’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

“I-I don’t understand.” Her voice was hesitant.

“Of course you understand. You played your role perfectly.”

“My role?”

I pierced her with a hard gaze, matching the harsh tone of my voice. “Your role of being a tease.”

Her blue eyes widened. I was going to enjoy using my dick in her, taunting her with it as I drove it into her tight body. Just as she had used her body and her supposed naivety to taunt me and trick me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about…” She had been the perfect choice for this fucking deception. Her baby blue eyes made her appear like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

My jaw tightened. Soon she would have my cock in her mouth, and I would force her to suck it hard and swallow my seed down her treacherous, guileful throat.

“You flaunted your virgin body in your white dress at the contract signing, fluttered your eyelashes at me and pretended to be an innocent.” I was getting hard just looking at her perfect lips, thinking of how I would use them again and again without mercy until she had satisfied me.

“I *am* innocent…Your twisted games have nothing to do with me,” she spat at me.

I leaned down and pushed myself toward her on the bed, capturing her slender body between my arms which I anchored on either side of her lap. My face was so close to hers and I could smell her sweet scent. It would be so easy to breach those last few centimeters, to capture those lips roughly between mine, and then take her body however I wished until she was begging me to stop.

I ran my fingertips over those luscious lips, down her throat and chest until my finger slipped into that enticing valley between her tits.

I could feel the heat of her skin and the fullness of her breasts. Her breaths were quick and heavy and she was almost panting.

Fuck, I couldn’t wait to have her panting under me. Writhing under my body.

But before that, I pushed myself back up to my feet. As she seemed so fond of her dress, I took my cell phone out.

Selecting the camera, I took a photograph of her.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking a photo.”

“Why?” she asked in confusion.

“To send to your family,” I responded.

“But I’m not dressed,” she said quickly, pulling her dress more tightly against herself.

My lips curled up in a cruel smile. “I can see that.”

I could see my words ticking over in her mind. “With how I look they might think…that…” Her voice had risen in horror.

“Oh, so you’re not as naive as you make out?” I gave her a cruel smile. “That’s the point. It will leave them wondering whether their dear, darling Mafia princess is still as pure as the driven snow. I wonder if they will still try to get you back if they think you are used goods?”

Her ripped, bloodstained dress was unzipped and hanging loosely from her upper body, and here she was sitting on my unmade bed. I would send this photo to her family—it would leave them wondering whether she was still an innocent virgin…or if I had deflowered her on what would have been her wedding night.

Her face fell, and part of me felt unnecessarily callous until I remembered what her family had done yesterday and her role in enticing me to L.A.

“You should take that shower.”

“I think I’ll wait until later.” I knew she was having second thoughts about the shower now that I was standing in front of her.

Too bad, I was looking forward to seeing that tantalizing body of hers. The glimpse of her sleeping in my bed in her lacy lingerie this morning had made me want to stay in bed and make her mine. Instead, I had jerked off in the shower, coming as I thought of her tight silky pussy gripping my hard thrusting cock.

“No. You'll shower *now*. Don’t make me drag you into that shower,” I warned. “You’re playing a dangerous game—a dangerous game you won’t win.”

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CHAPTER 11

MARCO

She wouldn’t win this battle of wills between us.

I was not a good man, and I was already having a hard time ignoring my stirring cock. Her defiance made me want to take her even more.

She paused, but then she got up and walked over to the bathroom.

“Good girl,” I said, pleased that she was obeying my command.

Once in the bathroom, she stood in front of the shower, toying with her dress. I switched on the water to heat. “Go ahead.”

“Can I have some privacy?” she snapped.

“No.”

She paled at my reply. “Are you going to just stand there and watch me?” she asked in alarm with her eyes wide.

“Yes. I’ve been looking forward to seeing what’s under the wrapping of my prize.”

“I hate you.”

“Get undressed and in the shower, or I’ll have to undress you myself like last night. But this time I’ll get to take off your pretty bra and panties too.”

My words pushed her into action. She didn’t want my hands near her again. She undid her zipper and let the dress slide to the ground, hesitating as she stood in her white virginal bra and panties.

“And the rest, beautiful.” The ‘beautiful’ part was true, especially with those startling blue eyes of hers, but I used the word to taunt her. “You’ve not got anything I haven’t seen before.”

Of course, as a man in our world, I had been free to sleep around and I had made the most of it—after all, I was twenty-seven years old and a red-blooded male. It was only women that had to stay pure for their wedding night. And how I was looking forward to savoring my nineteen-year-old virgin.

She narrowed her eyes and then turned her back to me. With trembling fingers, she unclasped her bra and let it fall to the floor and quickly pushed her panties down her thighs, at the same time moving forward hastily to get into the shower.

“Wait! Turn around and face me.”

She had her back to me and I could see the sumptuous curve of her ass, but I also wanted a clear look at the rest of her. She looked as though she was going to defy me, but then she slowly turned around and her eyes sparked at me.

Good, I preferred a girl who got angry instead of crying.

I had imagined how her breasts would look naked since the first time I had met her, and I was not disappointed. They were heavy and tipped with large, dark nipples that stood erect as she quivered under my stare, and my mouth watered at the thought of having those succulent nubs in my mouth.

I let my gaze wander down her exposed body, over her smooth belly and to her pink pussy lips which were just visible between her legs. Her cheeks were flushed red, but she kept up her scowl.

“Go get washed,” I said, nodding toward the shower. She quickly got into the shower, turning her back to me again.

I could tell my watching was making her nervous, and her movements were quick and jerky as she shampooed and conditioned her dark hair. Then she poured body wash onto a sponge and soaped her body before letting the hot water cascade down over her as she rinsed clean, droplets of water clinging temptingly to her flawless skin. Dear God, what was she doing to me?

She stayed under the hot stream of water for as long as possible, probably hoping that I would get bored and leave, but nothing was going to make me miss this show. When I decided she had been in the shower for long enough, or rather my cock couldn’t take it anymore, I called for her to get out. “Time’s up.”

“Let me guess, this is like a prison where showers are strictly timed.”

I hardened my expression. “I can be strict with you if that’s what you want.”

She swallowed, not saying anything further as she turned off the water and stayed standing in the shower, with her arms wrapped around herself. “Can I have a towel please?”

“I’ve got one for you here. Get out.” I held a clean towel open in my arms.

She paused but then stepped out of the shower into my arms. I patted her dry with the towel, taking my time to admire her nakedness as my hands felt her curves under the soft towel.

Seeing her like this, helpless and vulnerable, triggered something in me on a primitive level—she was mine to do with as I wished.

I could see she hated being exposed to me and at my mercy while I remained fully clothed. I crouched down to my haunches to dry her legs, starting at her slim ankles and perfect calves, before rubbing the towel over the back of her sensual thighs. I then carried on upwards.

My eyes came level with her slit which was teasing a glimpse of her pussy, that illicit place that was my right to take. Her pussy lips were wet from the shower, and I couldn’t wait to have them wet with something else.

By now she couldn’t hide the deep blush in her cheeks. How sweet—my blushing bride.

When I was satisfied that she was dry, I wrapped a clean towel around her body and tucked the end in over her breasts, letting my hand linger there.

She tried to push past me, but I held onto her upper arms and looked into her eyes as they glittered with fierce tears. “Go wait for me in the bedroom.”

She rushed off, trying to get some temporary respite from my nearness.

I took a deep breath. My cock was rock hard from seeing her, touching her and smelling her. I adjusted myself and thought that it felt like a long time since I’d had my hand pumping around my dick this morning.

I walked through the bedroom and unlocked the main door, grabbing a couple of her bags from the hallway. Her belongings had been sent ahead to Chicago last week in preparation for her arrival. “Your things arrived a few days ago. You can unpack. There is plenty of spare closet space for your things.”

“I don’t plan on hanging around, so I don’t need to unpack. I just need some clothes for today,” she huffed.

“You will be staying. Whether you unpack or not is up to you.” I stared at her. “Are you on birth control?”

She flushed. “What?”

“You heard.”

She remained silent, riling me further. “Answer me,” I demanded.

“Um, yes. My mother said that I should start it before our wedding night…” Her words drifted off as she flushed a deeper red.

“Good.” Then I grabbed her breakfast tray from where I had left it outside the door.

Placing it on top of the dresser, I left the room and made sure to lock the door behind me.

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CHAPTER 12

JULIANA

He left without saying another word and locked the door behind him.

Now he was gone, I felt I could breathe again. In the bathroom he had looked at me like a predator eyes its prey. He was dangerous and I knew I had to get away from him. His question about birth control had really unnerved me. He wouldn't be asking unless he wanted *that* from me. I needed to get away before that could happen.

Being kept under lock and key meant that I really was being kept as a prisoner. Although this room was a pretty luxurious prison.

I unzipped one of my bags to get some clothes to dress in. I looked at the dresses, blouses, and skirts which my mother maintained would be the appropriate outfits for a Mafia wife and for the Capo's wife.

I picked out a plain black bra and black panties. I tried to choose the least sexy undergarments that I had. I didn't want him looking at me again and I didn't want to draw his attention. I picked out some jeans and a t-shirt. I wasn't going to dress up for my captor.

I unwrapped the towel from my body and got dressed as quickly as possible. I couldn't help wondering if there were any cameras in this room watching me. That would be really creepy of him, but I knew not to underestimate him after what I had seen of him so far.

Once I was dressed, I looked at the breakfast tray with disinterest, being anything but hungry. I gulped down the glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. It felt so good that I was sure I must be dehydrated. I then poured myself some coffee and let the hot caffeine seep into my system and help soothe my frazzled brain.

I couldn't stop thinking about Jessica and wondering how she was. I wish I could just pick up my phone and call her, but I had nothing of my own here apart from my clothes. My phone, laptop, tablet, and anything else that might be useful were in a different bag, but of course he hadn't handed those to me. He was trying to keep me as isolated as possible.

After a while, with nothing else to do, I wandered over to the window and had a look out at the Marchiano estate. It was opulent, but it was still a prison.

The grounds appeared to be extensive with expansive green lawns and lots of trees stretching into what looked to be a wooded area. There was an outdoor swimming pool, as well as an impressive glasshouse containing an indoor pool, and I imagined that the indoor pool was the preferable option during the cold Chicago winters.

I could see a large garage block, probably filled with multiple black SUVs. There was also a helipad with a chopper on it—the perfect way to escape, I thought, had I known how to fly one. What I couldn't see though, was the boundary of the estate. Damn, that meant that it must be pretty large. Not being able to see where the boundary and exit were, made it all the harder to plot my escape.

Being too distracted with my concern over Jess to think about an escape plan right now, I let my eyes wander back over the gardens and tried to let the serene view calm me.

I hadn't seen much of the outside of the house when we had arrived because of the darkness, although I had been able to make out that it was a large modern property which was a short drive from the guarded perimeter gates. I wondered if there was more than one exit. Probably not, because that would make security harder and a man like Marco Marchiano would have many enemies he would want his family protected from.

One thing I had noticed upon our arrival was the huge traditional statue of the Virgin Mary on the front lawn, standing out in blatant contrast to the modern house. It must have been nearly ten feet tall.

This statue was incongruous not only with the mansion but also with the man I'd met. I was surprised that Marco even had a statue of a saint in his front yard. He could hardly be thought of as devout—I mean, come on, he killed people for a living.

I turned my gaze back from the gardens to look around the bedroom. I could have been in a hotel. High-end dark furniture stood out against the muted walls, the sheets were high count Egyptian cotton, and the comforter was so light that it must have been filled with the finest down feathers. I ran my hand over the two armchairs in front of the windows, enjoying the

caress of the velvet fabric and of the cashmere throws draped across them. Who said that crime didn’t pay?

For a few minutes I just stood there, trying to push the despair from my body—but, failing miserably, I felt tears overcome me and roll down my cheeks.

MARCO

After watching Juliana shower and taking her breakfast, I left the bedroom. I couldn’t trust myself to be around her while I was still furious about yesterday.

She would wait. Juliana and the Società had played me for a fool. They had made me look weak. They had made it look like I couldn’t keep my family and men safe.

Fuck, three men died yesterday. That could easily have been one of my brothers or Debi. They were my whole world—I would lay down my life for them and kill anyone who threatened them.

I made my way downstairs to eat breakfast with the rest of the family.

My brothers were all talking at once. Alessio was trying to talk to Camillo about a business issue; however, Camillo was ignoring him and instead talking to Danio about baseball. I looked across at Debi and couldn’t help but notice that she was quieter than usual.

As we sat around the kitchen island and I watched my siblings, I felt that all too familiar stab at my heart, particularly when I looked at Danio and Debi.

They were growing up without their mom—and that was all down to me.

They were better off with my father being dead, but no child should have to grow up without their mom. My worst guilt was about Debi. She had no real female role models in her life. Instead, she was surrounded by four guys who could never replace the maternal love she'd lost, no matter how hard I tried to fill the void.

Once we'd finished breakfast and everyone started to get up from their seats, I turned to my youngest brother. "Danio, have you managed to get the church CCTV yet?" He was the technical genius of the family and who we went to with all our I.T. issues. He even dressed the part, with jeans, sneakers, and a hoodie being his outfit of choice.

"The Società deleted it, probably not wanting us to watch it and get a clear idea of what went on. But I managed to retrieve the deleted file from their server because they forgot to delete it from there."

"Good job. Get it up and we'll watch it now." I sat down next to Danio, and we watched the footage together on his laptop. It felt strange watching the start of the wedding ceremony on the CCTV. I saw Debi when she had waved to me from the pews and I had winked back at her. It made my blood run cold to think that the shooter probably also had her in his range yesterday.

We continued to watch the footage, seeing the start of the ceremony. Then came the gunshots. "Freeze the video." We froze the video and replayed it several times in slow motion and from the different angles of the cameras. "As I thought, the Società were aiming for me with their first shot. There was a sniper up in the eaves of the church," I said, pointing to the shooter shown in the corner of the screen.

"Well, either Juliana is a very good actress, or she was genuinely as surprised by the shooting as we were," commented Danio.

“Shut it, Danio, I’m trying to watch this.” I was irritated that he was probably right, I reluctantly admitted to myself. Juliana definitely didn’t look as if she had expected or been prepared for any of it. She looked completely shocked by what happened.

That didn’t change the fact though, that she was part of a family of traitors. She hadn’t wanted to leave L.A. with me, despite the fact that she had signed herself over to me in the contract. I had been forced to drag her away from the church yesterday.

She would need to be taught obedience at the very least. She would need to learn that her loyalties were to me now, not the Società.

“Man, that poor girl who got shot instead. That was Juliana’s sister, right?” asked Danio. Trust him to be concerned about the Società girl who got shot.

He was still young, but he would toughen up as he got older. After our parents had died, Alessio and I had brought up Camillo, Danio, and Debi very differently from how we had been raised by our deranged father.

Danio was impatient to be initiated into the Fratellanza, but Alessio and I had decided we wanted our younger brothers to have as long a childhood as possible before being initiated into the Mafia world. Therefore, Camillo had not been initiated until he was sixteen, and Danio would also have to wait until he was sixteen to enter the Fratellanza.

I was glad we had waited to initiate Camillo—he might look like a tough guy, and he certainly did his Enforcer role without hesitation due to his family loyalty, but he didn’t lust after blood the same way I did.

“Maybe we should find out how the sister is, you know, because Juliana must be pretty worried about her,” carried on Danio, oblivious to my scowl at the mention of Juliana’s family.

“For Christ’s sake, Danio, Juliana’s family nearly killed us. It’s their own fault they shot one of their own. I’m not worried about Juliana’s feelings, and neither should you be.”

“But she’s just a girl. She’s not responsible for the actions of her family.”

“Her family is Società Mafia. That makes her our enemy, period.”

Danio tried a different angle. “If one of you guys had been shot, I would want someone to tell me how you were doing.”

“Yeah, I know,” I replied.

Danio just continued to look at me with his big brown eyes. They were just like Debi’s eyes. Gentle and soulful. Fuck. These kids always managed to worm their way under my skin.

“Shouldn’t you be doing something else like schoolwork—I thought you had an English paper due?” I tried to change the subject, not liking the direction this conversation had taken.

“Yeah, I do. I’m heading over to study with Carolinne later,” he said, referring to his best friend, Carolinne Tocchini, before turning back to his laptop. He would stay glued to that screen all day if he could.

I went to find Alessio to ask when the funerals for our soldiers would be held. Danio told me that he was in the gym room. As I made my way to that part of the house, I couldn’t help the images from the CCTV from replaying in my mind.

Had the sniper hit me, he probably would have taken down my brothers next. A shudder went through me. I would lay down my life for my siblings and the thought of my siblings dying shook me to the core and ignited my fury even further.

And the only member of the Società I could exact my revenge on was currently upstairs in my bedroom. Revenge would be the sweetest feeling.

When I came back from talking with Alessio, Danio called me over to show me something on his laptop. “I’ve hacked into the computer systems of the hospital where Jessica Bonardi is being treated. I’ve got an update on her condition.”

Fuck, that boy was too caring for his own good.

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CHAPTER 13

MARCO

When I took up a lunch tray up to Juliana later on, I saw that the breakfast tray from earlier was still sitting on the dresser untouched apart from the juice and coffee.

“You need to eat.” I took the plate with her lunch sandwich and brought it over to where she was sitting on the bed.

She was dressed in a simple white t-shirt and blue jeans, with no make-up on her bare face and showing faint smudges under her huge blue eyes. It made her look even younger than her nineteen years and somehow more vulnerable. It reminded me that she was eight years younger than me and had been sheltered all her life—that is, until now.

Perhaps my conscience was pricking after seeing her on the church CCTV taken by complete surprise when she heard the gunshots. Then I

mentally shook myself. I was a Made Man—I wasn't burdened by that thing called a conscience.

She took her lunch plate from me and checked the filling to find it was ham, cheese, and salad, but she continued looking at the food with mistrust. "Did you put poison in it?"

"That would be such a waste—given I can think of far more interesting things to do with you."

Her face blanched at my words.

"Eat," I said, nodding toward the sandwich in front of her.

She looked at the sandwich without any enthusiasm. I was beginning to run out of tolerance. She hardly ate anything yesterday, given our preoccupation with escaping L.A., and she hadn't touched her breakfast this morning. "Have you heard anything about Jessica yet?" she asked quietly, as if afraid of my reaction upon hearing a mention of her treacherous family.

"Eat your sandwich and then I'll tell you what I know."

She looked surprised at my response, but she picked up the sandwich and bit into it, eating it all quickly and barely chewing each mouthful before swallowing.

"Slow down. There's no rush."

She ignored me and that riled me—she really needed to learn to do as she was told.

"There, I'm finished. Now tell me what you know about Jess. Please."

I looked at her for a few long seconds, seeing the eagerness in her eyes. She clearly loved her sister as much as I cared about my own siblings. "Our sources tell us that she was shot in the shoulder, but the bullet missed the major arteries and was a through and through. They've patched her up, but

she’s still in the hospital due to the amount of blood she lost. As I thought, they had a doctor on standby at the church. It was just bad luck that she got caught in the crossfire.”

Juliana exhaled a ragged breath. “But she’ll be okay?”

“She’s not critical. She should be okay, barring any complications.”

“And what about her shoulder? Will it heal fully?”

“They don’t seem worried about it. They are happy with her progress so far.” I saw her eyes fill with tears, which slowly trickled down her cheeks. I picked up her empty plate and headed toward the door. “There’s water on the tray if you want it.”

I closed the door and turned the lock behind me, firmly shutting her inside her prison.

JULIANA

I felt relief, knowing that Jessica was going to be okay.

I still wished that I could see her with my own eyes and speak to her myself. But knowing that she was not in any critical danger lifted a large amount of tension from my shoulders.

After a few minutes, I went over to the tray to see what else there was. There was a fruit salad with pineapple, pear, and strawberries, so I tucked in and ate it all, my appetite coming back to me. There was also a carafe filled with water and sliced lemon and I poured some into a glass and drank it, enjoying its coolness and the sharp zest of the lemon.

After lunch, I didn’t know if it was the exhaustion from yesterday catching up with me, but I lay down on the bed and took a nap.

When I woke up, the late afternoon sun was filtering into the bedroom. I walked over to the windows and feeling the warmth of the sun shining through the glass, I wondered how long I would be kept in this room. Perhaps forever. Or maybe until he was bored of me and decided to kill me.

The Fratellanza were not known to show any mercy to women if they were deemed to be enemies or traitors. And I was part of the Società, so I was definitely considered to be an enemy.

My thoughts turned toward tonight. Would my captor show me mercy again tonight, as he did last night? If he wasn't going to touch me, he wouldn't have been interested in whether I was on birth control.

I felt panic starting to swirl in my stomach again, now that it was heading toward evening. How much longer would I be alone in this room until he came to me? Suddenly the thought of being isolated and alone in this room became more appealing when compared to the thought of being here with him.

I couldn't just wait for him to do whatever he had planned for me. I started looking around the room, opening all the drawers and closets, trying to find anything that I could use as a weapon or that could help me escape.

Even if I could get out of this room, I would still need to make it past anyone else in the house and the guards at the estate perimeter. But I couldn't think about that now. I had to focus on one step at a time.

I had no luck in the bedroom. The drawers and closets held nothing apart from Marco's clothes. And, of course, many of these clothes were in black, the color of choice for the Mafia. Black hid the blood most easily.

After my search in the bedroom came up fruitless, I moved into the adjoining bathroom and looked through the drawers in the vanities there.

There wasn’t so much as a razor blade in the bathroom. He must have already thought to remove anything that I could use.

My eye caught the fork on the lunch tray. It wasn’t much but it was all I had, and I couldn’t just sit back and let him do whatever he wanted to me.

I put the fork in the pocket of my jeans. I really hoped that there weren’t any cameras in the bathroom or bedroom, I thought to myself, as I looked around trying to see if I could spot any. I couldn’t see anything, but then the best cameras were the ones that were hidden, tricking the person being watched into a false sense of privacy.

My nerves were all over the place. I told myself that it was the adrenaline and that was a good thing. But it was making my body feel like it had electricity going through it and making me jumpy.

I was no expert on how to stab someone. On TV crime shows, they often seemed to aim for the kidney area when stabbing someone. I wasn’t exactly sure where the kidneys were in relation to the rest of the abdomen. Damn, I should have paid more attention to the nuns in our biology lessons.

I decided that I would just aim in the general direction and hope for the best. I just needed enough time to get out of this room and then hopefully out of the house.

In the evening Marco came in with my dinner finally. It seemed as if I had been waiting hours for Marco to arrive. But now that he was here, I wished for a bit more time before I had to put my plan into action.

Dinner actually smelled good, and I silently berated myself for not eating more today. I would need all the energy I could get.

“Good, I see you finished the rest of your lunch.” I watched him set down my tray, shivering as I noticed his dark hair and shadowy eyes. Everything about his body screamed danger to me.

I wasn’t sure if he was going to come nearer to me, so I decided to walk toward him on the pretext of checking what was for dinner. “I was hungry. I must have gotten my appetite back. Dinner smells good, what is it?”

My voice sounded unnaturally high to me. I stood next to him, trying not to act nervous, as he uncovered the plate to reveal a pasta dish.

Fear made me hesitate.

My hands felt clammy with sweat.

But then I withdrew my hand from my pocket, my fingers wrapped around the fork.

And as he turned toward me, I stabbed the fork into his abdomen.

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CHAPTER 14

JULIANA

His reflexes were quick.

His expression didn’t change but his body leapt into action. He tried to block my arm and managed to deflect the full extent of my blow.

Where I did manage to connect with his body it felt like I had struck a solid wall.

He hit my wrist and made it shoot with pain so that I dropped the fork. I heard my lost chance clatter loudly onto the hardwood floor.

I knew I wouldn’t get this opportunity again. I decided to make a run for it. My movements felt sluggish as if I were moving against heavy water. But I must have been fast because I was nearly at the door.

I focused on the door and getting my hand on the handle before feeling his vice-like grip around my arm suddenly yanking me back toward him

and making me scream out loud.

I stumbled but managed to stay on my feet. I used my momentum to ram my elbow into his rib cage. My arm throbbed with agony where it hit his ribs. He looked as if he had barely felt my blow. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he snarled.

The grayness of his eyes was almost black as if any mercy he might have shown me had been swallowed up by a black hole. And he smiled a twisted smile at me.

He picked me up, ignoring my struggling limbs. His arms were harshly constricting my torso making it hard to get air into my lungs. He took a few steps across the room and threw me onto the bed. The little air left in my lungs whooshed out of my body as I thudded down onto the mattress. But I still tried to leap up from the bed.

He stalked closer to me again and blocked me in, his eyes fixed on me like lasers and caging me in with their glare. His hands shoved at my shoulders, making me lose my balance and fall back on the bed. As my back hit the mattress he kneeled over me, with one knee either side of my body caging me in.

I clawed at his arms and chest, trying to get away from him.

I felt his hand grab my wrist and turned my head to see his tight muscles restraining my right arm. I tried to dodge my other hand away from him but despite my struggles he caught it too.

My muscles strained in protest as he savagely tugged my arms above my head, while at the same time his powerful thighs pinned my legs down onto the mattress.

I was panting from my exertions. I could see his fury in the tense way he held his body above me with his muscles bunched up tightly.

I couldn’t give up just yet. I tried to break free of his grip, twisting my body under him.

He pressed himself against me and suddenly I froze, realizing that he was hard. He was aroused by my struggles.

I lay under him, still except for the heaving pants which were making my chest rapidly rise and fall.

“You are mine. You won’t escape me. Now or ever,” he growled into my ear, making me shiver at the coldness in his voice. I tried to move my face away from his lips, but I could barely move with his heavy body on top of mine.

I waited for my punishment, my arms aching while they quivered in his hold. I was no match for his strength or his cruelty.

Laying under him, my eyes were drawn to the top of his v-neck t-shirt and the dark hair which trailed down toward his chest. His scent consumed me, with its hint of musk and lemongrass along with the slight undertone of masculine sweat.

He looked at me intently as we just lay there.

He got up then and pointed toward the tray. “Eat. You’ll need your strength for later.” His voice was as hard as flint. He walked out of the room without another glance at me.

After he was gone, I stayed lying on the bed for a few minutes, attempting to steady my ragged breaths and racing pulse. I thought about what he had meant about later but pushed that from my mind and tried to calm my galloping heart rate.

A long while later, my hunger eventually pulled me toward the tray of food. I went over and saw that he had brought me a pasta dish with a

creamy ham and mushroom sauce. As I ate, I thought it tasted good—they must have a housekeeper. At least I wouldn't starve while I was kept here.

***

As the light started to fade, I decided to get undressed for bed.

I still hadn't unpacked my clothes, so I went over to my bags and took a look through them. Rummaging through, I saw some of the wispy nightdresses that my mother had bought for me, saying that my husband would expect me to dress like this for him in the bedroom. I snorted.

I thought back over the last couple of months when we had been busy preparing for my life as a new wife, never imagining then that I would be expected to sleep in the bed of a man I wasn't even married to.

I wondered what my family's reaction had been to the photo Marco sent them of me in my torn and bloody wedding dress, sitting on his unmade bed. I cringed with embarrassment and felt my cheeks heat. I didn't want my parents or the Società discussing what would be the first time I would have sex, speculating on whether he had taken me last night and if he had been rough with me.

I had to stop thinking about it. Shoving aside the racy lingerie my mother had packed, I picked out some simple sleep shorts and a tank top. I took the nightclothes into the bathroom with me to get changed and brush my teeth.

Again, just as last night, I curled up on the velvet armchair in front of the windows and waited for him to return. I'd put on a light robe over my

nightclothes as the air had turned cooler. From the armchair I watched the sun disappear and the darkness take over.

When he returned later that evening, my senses went on high alert. I knew that he would still be angry about what I did earlier, trying to stab him with the fork. Maybe it hadn't been the best idea, but it had been the only thing I could think of.

I was sitting in the dark, so he switched on the nightstand lamp, and I watched him while he undressed.

MARCO

"Come to bed," I said.

"What are you going to do?" She bit down nervously on her lower lip.

"Come to bed and see." She remained in the armchair. Fuck, would she ever be obedient? "Don't make me drag you into this bed," I warned.

She walked slowly toward the bed, her bare feet silent against the wooden floor as if she were afraid that any sound might provoke me after what had happened earlier. She slipped off her robe, letting it slide down her slender arms, before quickly getting under the covers.

I turned off the lamp on my nightstand and got into bed. She had turned away from me again, but that didn't fit in with my plans for her tonight.

I wrapped my arm around her middle and tugged her toward me so that her back fitted into my chest. She gave a little squeak of surprise and tried to scramble out of my hold. Her body writhing against me was making my cock harden into an erect spike.

“You should stop moving against me like that,” I said in a gruff voice, my arousal starting to undo me.

She ignored me at first but then, sensing the stiff rod pushing against her ass, she abruptly stopped wriggling.

“Just relax,” I murmured.

But I could feel her body tensed up in my arms, probably because she was wondering what I would do next.

“We’re just going to go to sleep,” I said in a low voice.

She was silent for a few moments. “We are?” she asked incredulously.

“Yeah. Now relax.” Fuck, this girl was killing me. I wouldn’t take her in anger, not when she was a virgin. And that stunt she pulled earlier with the fork had definitely made me rage.

I didn’t know what she had been planning to do if she had gotten past me. There was no way she would have been able to get off the estate. That was a rookie move by my innocent little virgin.

Her body was rigid with tension, but I didn’t loosen my grip. Instead, I waited for her breathing to relax and for her muscles to yield to sleep.

The heat from her body merged into mine, enclosing both of us in a warm cocoon. I didn’t usually like cuddling women, but for some reason I liked holding her.

While she slept, I noticed how her body fitted perfectly into mine as I held her against me. As we lay there, I admired her profile against the moonlight. I ran my nose down her silky hair and inhaled. She smelled perfect.

***

I woke up with a start, my hand automatically going to my gun on the nightstand.

I flipped on the nightstand light and scanned the room before checking the security feeds via my phone. Juliana was asleep next to me and everything was as it should have been, but I still felt unsettled.

I always felt unsettled.

I looked at the time—it was only 1.26 a.m. Fuck, I thought as I lay back down, pounding my pillow back into shape. I tried to relax but nothing eased the strange feeling inside of me.

I sighed as I shut my eyes, willing sleep to come to me, but knowing that it would elude me.

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CHAPTER 15

JULIANA

When I woke in the morning, Marco’s side of the bed was rumpled but empty.

He was gone again already. I’m not sure how he managed to sneak out so quietly, but I was glad I was alone. During the night I had tried to free myself from his strong embrace but as soon as I had tried to move, he would be awake and dragging me back into his firm hold.

This was my third day here. If he was going to kill me, he probably would have done it by now—he didn’t strike me as the patient kind. Maybe I had been wrong in thinking that was his ultimate plan for me?

As I lay against the pillows, I noticed that the sheets held a hint of his masculine scent. I couldn’t get away from him even when he wasn’t here.

I decided to get up and I walked over to the dresser where I saw that my breakfast tray had already been left. I was trapped here, with no way out, so I decided to eat breakfast and keep my strength up in case another opportunity to escape arose. I spooned some natural yogurt and berry compote into the bowl of muesli and poured myself a cup of coffee. I carried these over to the armchair and sat down to eat my breakfast.

I would have to be smarter about making an escape plan, and I also needed to be able to get a sense of the layout of the house and grounds if I was really going to make it out of here—I wasn't going to let yesterday's failed attempt deter me.

After I had finished my breakfast and coffee, I saw that Marco had left another one of my bags by the bedroom door. I eagerly tore through it, hoping, no praying, that it held my laptop or phone, but it just held more of my clothes and toiletries, including my favorite shampoo. I sighed and carried some of the things through to the bathroom and took a shower. I wanted to be showered and dressed before Marco came back.

I dressed in some yoga pants and a top and then spent the morning gazing out of the window.

When it must have been around lunchtime, I heard the lock turn in the door. The door opened and Marco walked in.

I saw his expression and I felt my insides go cold. He was going to punish me now for my attempted escape yesterday.

I stood up from the bed as he walked into the room. That way he would tower over me slightly less than if I remained sitting on the bed.

He was wearing pale gray jeans, dark boots, and a black t-shirt which emphasized his powerful muscles and strength, making me shiver.

"Come," he instructed, holding out his hand.

I looked at it dumbfounded. Was he going to let me out of this room? Was he going to take me to a torture room or a dark basement for my punishment? He was a Made Man, and I knew for sure that he would have somewhere like that nearby.

Perhaps I should refuse to leave this room?

But, deep down, I knew second guessing him was futile—I had to take the risk if I was going to get a look around this house and find a way to escape. Everything I learned about him, his family, and this house would be useful in formulating an escape plan.

I had to stop letting my fear get in the way if I was going to find a way out of here and away from him.

I moved forward, but I didn't take his hand.

As I passed him, he firmly grabbed my wrist as if to show who was in control. His grip was inescapable, conveying how he felt right now. Fuck, I really shouldn't have tried that escape yesterday.

He led me out of the room and down the hallway. This was my first proper look at the house. On that first night we had arrived late and exhausted, so everything had been a bit of a blur. He took me down the staircase and into what appeared to be a large living area. He was walking fast with his long strides, not giving me much time to take in my surroundings while I tried to keep up with him.

The room we walked into had a huge sitting room which was open-plan to a dining room and spacious kitchen. I guessed that this must be their main living area. He carried on tugging me along with him until he came to an abrupt halt and pulled me to a standstill too.

"Explain." His tone was a clear order.

"What do you mean?" I frowned with confusion.

“That.” He nodded toward the couches. His anger seemed to mean that he could only utter one-word commands today.

I frowned at his tone, wondering what was going on and what it had to do with me.

I could see his younger sister, Debi, and his brother, Danio, sitting on the floor, partly hidden from view by the couches, and then I heard a familiar bark.

I yanked my arm from Marco’s grip and ran over to where I had heard the sound come from. “Mr. Fluffy!”

And on hearing my voice, my beloved dog gave an excited, loud bark and leaped up from Debi’s arms to come bounding over to me. For the first time since I had arrived in this hellhole, I had a reason to smile. As I threw my arms around my pooch, he barked nonstop and couldn’t help himself from licking my face, causing a giggle to burst from my throat.

“Mr. Fluffy?” said Alessio. I looked up and saw Alessio and Camillo had come into the room. Alessio stood with his arms folded across his chest, a less than pleased expression on his face. What was it with these guys? They obviously weren’t big animal lovers.

“I’ve missed you, Mr. Fluffy,” I exclaimed. “I wasn’t expecting you for a few more days. I’m so happy to see you.” And I couldn’t help giggling more as he ran around me in animated circles. Danio and Debi, who had been sitting on the floor with him, laughed along with me.

“So help me God, you better start talking, Juliana,” said Marco. I looked up to see him scowling. “What is this?”

I shrugged. “He’s my dog obviously.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“I know he’s arrived a few days sooner than expected, but that’s a bonus, right?”

“Bonus?” thundered Marco. Oh Lord, we were back to the angry one-word utterances again.

“Yes. I didn’t expect him until next week because he’s been poorly and has been at the vets, but they must have decided he was well enough to come home. Before the wedding, I had arranged for a pet courier company to bring him to Chicago because the vet wasn’t going to release him until after I had left L.A.”

“Nobody said anything about a dog.” Marco griped.

“We’re definitely not having a dog in this house. No way,” objected Alessio.

“And a Made Man can’t have such a ridiculous-looking animal for a pet,” commented Camillo, with a look of complete bewilderment on his face. Camillo was the scariest looking out of the Marchiano brothers, being built like an ox and having numerous tattoos all over his body.

I sighed. “I don’t see what the problem is. He’s just a dog. Surely having one dog in the house isn’t going to threaten your big scary reputation?”

“Maybe he’s got a listening device implanted in him? He might be some sort of Società spy,” commented Camillo as he eyed up my pet suspiciously. “Are you sure he’s even a dog? He looks like a rust-colored grizzly bear.”

“Of course he’s a dog. He’s a Chow Chow dog. This is what they look like.”

“How the fuck did he even get past the perimeter guards?” Alessio asked, as if Mr. Fluffy was some sort of lethal intruder who should have been detected.

Danio looked up at Alessio. “The pet courier company needed a signature for delivery. One of the soldiers at the gate signed for him.”

Alessio looked even more annoyed now. “For Christ’s sake, one of our own soldiers let him in? When I find out which soldier was stupid enough to do that, he’ll wish that he’d never been born.”

Marco carried on glaring at me. “It doesn’t matter. The dog’s not staying. And that’s final.”

“You’re the one that insisted you wanted me. And I come with Mr. Fluffy. Don’t the marriage vows say something like ‘with all my worldly goods I thee endow’?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t actually get married or get around to making those marriage vows, remember?” said Marco, using my words from the first night back at me.

“Let me return to L.A. then,” I retorted in a sweet voice. “Mr. Fluffy is more than welcome there.”

“What sort of stupid name is Mr. Fluffy anyway?” Camillo interjected, while he kept looking at my dog as if he were some sort of alien.

“It was his name when we got him at the animal shelter. Anyway, it suits him with his big fur coat.”

“Ow, ow, ow! He just bit me,” shrieked Camillo.

I smiled to myself. I’d always known my dog was a good judge of character.

“He should be called *Mr. Fucky* instead,” Camillo muttered in a voice loud enough for me to hear.

“We come as a package. Take it or leave it,” I announced, taking my pet and marching back upstairs.

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CHAPTER 16

MARCO

I watched as Juliana hurried back up the staircase with her dog, appearing eager to get back to the bedroom.

We all stood around for a few moments, looking at her retreating back, before I decided I needed a distraction from my current bad mood.

“Go and lock the door to my bedroom so she can’t escape,” I ordered Camillo before heading into the office to do some work.

Before I could get started, Alessio marched in. “That dog can’t stay; you know that, don’t you?” Alessio stood with his legs apart and with his armed crossed over his chest, and I could see he was deadly serious about this.

“I know. Leave it to me.”

“I mean it, Marco. Juliana shouldn’t even be in this house, and there’s no way her dog is staying too.” Alessio had a warning note to his voice, and

meeting his eyes, I could see this was non-negotiable for him.

“Look, I’ll sort it out. The dog won’t be staying,” I sighed.

“The girl shouldn’t even be here in the first place. What’s the point of having her here? You were only marrying her to cement our alliance with the Società, but now that’s blown up we don’t need her around. I just don’t get why we’re keeping her.”

“*We* aren’t keeping her. *I’m* keeping her. She’s mine. And I can do whatever the fuck I want with her, including using her for my enjoyment if I so wish.”

Alessio’s expression made it clear that he didn’t agree with my plan.

I carried on. “She’s the best revenge. Just think how they’ll be out of their minds with panic, wondering what I’m doing to their little innocent, whether I’m defiling her and dishonoring that pure body of hers.” I gave a cruel laugh. “They’ll fucking regret the day they came up with their plan to take us out. They rolled the dice when they promised her to me, and then they lost the play. And now they have to pay the price.”

“And the price is?” asked Alessio, raising an eyebrow.

“The price is her dishonor, her defilement, and her life. The purest things in a Made Man’s life are his daughters. They’ll be driving themselves mad, not knowing what we’re doing to her, not knowing if she’s still alive. That will be their punishment.”

Alessio regarded me. “If it’s about revenge, Marco, we can go back to L.A. and find some Società fuckers for you to torture and kill.” He wasn’t letting this go.

“Look, Juliana is staying. That’s final. The dog situation I’ll handle—I’ll get it sent back to L.A. Happy?”

“I’d be happier if the kids weren’t already getting attached to that animal,” declared Alessio.

“The dog’s been here all of five minutes. No one is getting attached to it, trust me.”

Right then, Camillo barged into my office. “I vote we get rid of the dog,” he blurted out, interrupting our discussion.

“I’ve already told you Camillo, you’re our Enforcer—you *don’t* get a fucking vote,” I snapped.

“This isn’t a business matter. It’s a family issue, so I should get a say,” complained Camillo.

I sat down at my desk to get back to work, then realized I didn’t have my phone. “For fuck’s sake, I’ve left my phone in the kitchen.” Pushing back my chair, I got up to fetch it, Alessio following me back to the kitchen and Camillo trailing after us still whining about the dog.

Debi and Danio were tidying up the breakfast dishes. When Debi saw me, she ran to me and started on about the dog. “Marco, please can we keep Mr. Fluffy? Oh please, Marco,” begged Debi. Debi and Danio had always wanted a dog and had asked for one several times, but Alessio was adamant that we weren’t having a dog in the house.

“We’ll help look after it, feed it and take it for walks and stuff. It’ll be awesome,” chimed in Danio.

“Please, please, please, Marco,” pleaded Debi.

“No one’s getting attached to the dog, huh?” said Alessio, raising his eyebrows at me in an ‘I-told-you-so’ expression. “It sounds to me like Debi is getting ready to sign us all up to the Mr. Fluffy Fan Club.”

I looked at Debi and Danio. “Look, the dog isn’t staying, so don’t fall in love with him. Understand?” I didn’t like saying no to Danio, and especially

not to Debi when she looked at me with those big brown eyes of hers, but Alessio would cut my dick off if I agreed to keep the dog.

“But didn’t you see how cute he was? He’s so soft and adorable. I think he really liked me.” Debi seemed oblivious to my warning that the dog was not staying.

Camillo scowled. “That dog is not cute. He attacked me, your own brother. He’s a vicious savage.” Although Camillo was grumbling, he also looked hurt that Debi had already forgotten about the dog biting him. “Look at the wound he’s left,” he exclaimed, while pointing to a non-existent mark on his ankle.

Debi looked seriously at Camillo. “You did insult him by saying he looked ridiculous and that his name was stupid.”

Camillo rolled his eyes. “He’s an animal. He can’t understand what we say.”

Debi gazed at Camillo doubtfully. “He seems pretty smart to me.”

Walking back to the office, I tried to swallow down my annoyance.

I’d never heard so much fucking dog talk in my life, and it was only 10.00 a.m.

JULIANA

Today followed pretty much the same pattern as yesterday, with me left alone in the bedroom and meals being brought up to me. However, today I had my dog for company, and that made all the difference.

Another difference was that my meals were brought up by Alessio, not Marco. I wasn’t sure where Marco was and when I asked Alessio, he didn’t

answer my question. He seemed particularly moody and kept shooting daggers at Mr. Fluffy.

I realized that if Marco was planning to torture me, he probably would have taken me to his torture chamber already. The fact that he hadn't raped, tortured, or killed me yet made me feel a little stronger in myself, as did having my dog with me so that I was no longer all alone. And since Marco had told me that my sister was going to be alright, that had also made me feel a little better.

I still wasn't sure exactly what Marco wanted with me. Perhaps he wanted to torment me, and he would keep me until he got bored of me?

Just as yesterday, when it started to get dark, I got undressed and put on my nightclothes. Tonight, instead of sitting on the velvet armchair, I sat cross-legged on the floor playing with my pet dog. He had definitely missed me and was full of energy and antics.

Later, when I heard the lock turning in the door, I looked up and saw Marco walk in. He scowled, whether at me or at my dog I wasn't sure, but it was probably at us both.

Marco was about to get undressed when I stopped him. "Mr. Fluffy needs to pee. Can you take him outside please?"

Marco looked at me and gave me a hard stare. His top lip curled in annoyance, and he didn't reply.

"Unless you want him to pee on the bedroom floor?"

"For fuck's sake, I'm not your damn dog-sitter. Come on, *Dog*. You've got exactly two minutes to pee and then I am bringing you back inside whether you're done or not."

"Charming. Is that how you speak to your men? I can see now why they fear you."

“Careful, beautiful.” He continued to stare at me, and I just stared back at him. Then he turned and took Mr. Fluffy outside with him.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. I probably shouldn’t provoke him, but that was the only way I could take my frustration out right now.

I got ready for bed, and a few minutes later, Marco arrived back in the bedroom with Mr. Fluffy in tow.

“He’s not sleeping in our bed, so don’t get any ideas,” he snapped.

“I’d rather have my own bedroom and my own bed.”

“Life is full of disappointments. Deal with it.”

I took a couple of spare pillows from the closet and used them to make a bed for my dog. He seemed happy enough with the improvised dog bed and gave it a sniff and walked around it a few times before leaping onto it and snuggling down.

Marco turned out the lights and climbed into bed. As he did yesterday, he laid behind me and pulled me back into his arms and held me against his chest. I lay rigidly in his arms and into the dark, I said, “He really needs to go out to exercise twice a day, plus obviously to pee.”

When Marco didn’t reply, I carried on. “Will you be able to take him out for me?”

“I’ve already told you I’m not your dog-sitter. You need to take him out yourself.”

I became very still. “Does that mean that I’m allowed out of this room?”

“If that means Dog doesn’t pee on the floor, then yes. But not by yourself. I’ll take you out after breakfast.”

I smiled into the darkness. I was going to be allowed to leave this room tomorrow. My dog always brought happiness and joy everywhere he went, I thought to myself, while I drifted off to sleep.

***

By the next morning, Marco had changed his mind and instead took Mr. Fluffy outside after breakfast by himself.

He didn't trust me, I knew that, but I was still bitterly disappointed and frustrated. I knew from what he'd said that the funerals of his dead soldiers were today, and I guessed that was probably souring his mood.

I wondered again how Jess was getting on and prayed that she was recovering. Whenever I thought back to the church, I felt worry and guilt churn up my insides as if it was somehow my fault that Jess got hurt—it had been at my wedding after all.

And I was her older sister and I had always looked out for her until that day—until I had been dragged away from her while she lay bleeding and unconscious on the floor.

***

The next couple of days followed the same routine. Marco and I slept in the same bed, but all my meals were in the bedroom and Marco would collect Mr. Fluffy twice a day for a run around in the gardens. I suspected that Danio and Debi might be involved in the dog walking.

Later that week, I was in a particularly irritable mood one evening. "I've been locked in this room for days now," I griped.

“Well, you shouldn’t have tried to escape before,” responded Marco.

“You’re punishing me, is that it?”

“No, beautiful. You would know if I was punishing you.”

After a silence, he said, “You can come with me tomorrow when I take the dog for a walk after breakfast.”

“Really?” I asked eagerly.

“Yes.” He looked at me carefully. “But you have to give me something I want.”

I hesitated. “Like what?”

His eyes burned into me. “Like we take a shower together.”

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CHAPTER 17

JULIANA

I didn’t say anything for a second, my mind whirring.

“That hardly seems like a fair exchange.” My voice sounded higher than normal, and I was having difficulty getting the words to come out.

“You asked for something that you want, to go outside, so I’m asking for something I want in return. That’s how this is going to work. You decide whether to agree or not.”

He waited for me to answer. I frowned slightly, trying to think. “Only a shower?”

“Only a shower. I won’t do anything you don’t want.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” I must have been crazy to even be considering this.

“Have I hurt you so far?”

“What, you mean apart from kidnapping me, locking me in this room and not letting me speak to my family?”

Marco narrowed his eyes. “If you had come willingly as per the contract you signed, those things wouldn’t have been necessary. I could have treated you a lot worse, especially after you tried to stab me and escape. I haven’t physically hurt you. But it’s your choice—I won’t force you.”

I considered what he had just said. I was probably doing a deal with the devil, but I had to get out of this room before I went completely crazy.

“Okay,” I whispered quietly.

MARCO

We looked at each other and when Juliana didn’t make a move toward the bathroom, I stepped slowly toward her. Her eyes were wide, and she looked like a deer caught in headlights. And I was her predator: the big bad wolf.

I took her hand and pulled her toward the bathroom. She stiffened her arm, but she followed behind me.

When we got to the bathroom, I let go of her hand and turned on the water in the shower to heat up. The sound of the falling water broke the silence in the room.

She didn’t move. I started to unbutton my shirt and she just watched me. When I had undone the top few buttons, I pulled it off over my head, and then I undid my belt and zipper and took my pants off.

I was left standing in my boxer briefs and my cock was already straining against the fabric in anticipation of our shower.

As I went to take my briefs off, I saw Juliana's eyes go even wider in alarm and she turned around quickly and started undressing, probably in an effort to avoid looking at my erection. She took off her top and jeans, leaving her slim body in just her pale blue panties and bra.

She reached around to unclasp her bra, struggling due to her shaking fingers. "Let me." I stilled her by placing my hands on her shoulders and then I undid the clasp, pushing the straps off her arms.

She kept her back to me and placed her fingers in the waistband of her panties. She started to remove them and then bent to push them further down her long legs, not realizing that in doing so she gave me a delicious view of her pink pussy.

How I would love to see her bent over on all fours on my bed, with her thighs spread open, waiting for my cock. By now I was rock hard, and we hadn't even gotten into the shower yet.

After taking off her panties, she looked over her shoulder at me.

"Get in." I gestured for her to get into the shower.

She swallowed and stepped into the large shower. She stood under the showerhead, allowing the hot water to tumble over her curves like a waterfall.

I just watched her for a few long seconds, before moving to join her in the shower. I stood close to her so that we were both under the large showerhead. She kept her back to me and reached for her shampoo, probably for something to do with her hands.

"No," I said, and she turned her head around in surprise. "Give it to me," I said in a gruff tone.

She slowly handed me the bottle containing her jasmine-scented shampoo. As she watched me, I poured a small amount into my palm and

then spread it across both palms. “Turn your head away from me.”

She hesitated, but then did as she was told. She was learning.

With her facing away from me, I rested my palms on the back of her head, making her jump. “Relax. I’m just going to wash your hair.” And with that, I proceeded to spread the shampoo throughout her dark locks, inhaling the flowery scent.

Once I was satisfied with the lather, I held her firmly by her upper arms and pushed her back under the spray, letting the water wash the suds away. Next, I applied some conditioner to her strands and then used my fingers to massage her scalp. She tilted back her head a little, pushing her head into my hands as a kitten would when it’s petted.

I grasped her by her arms and turned her around to face me. I locked my eyes on hers and raised my fingers back to her scalp, and as I continued to knead my fingers in her hair, she closed her eyes, and I heard a low sigh escape from her parted lips.

Fuck, her response to my touch was a fan to my desire.

I pushed her back under the spray again, and while the conditioner washed away, I grabbed the body wash and poured some onto my fingers and rubbed my palms together.

Juliana had turned away from me as she rinsed the conditioner out of her hair. I placed my soapy palms on her shoulders, making her flinch and turn her head around quickly to see what I was doing. Washing her hair was one thing, but having my hands on her naked skin was making her panic.

“Shh, beautiful. Let me wash you,” I said, keeping my hands in place and gently massaging her shoulders.

She didn’t respond, but she turned her head back away from me and let me rub over her shoulders and lightly down her arms, before I soaped her

slender back and ran my palms over the luscious globes of her ass, squeezing their fullness.

I moved my hands back up to her arms and turned her around to face me. She didn’t resist. Her pupils were dilated in those big blue eyes of hers, and she was taking shallow breaths.

She was turned on.

I kept my eyes fixed on her as I glided my soapy hands over her delicate throat and collarbone, moving my hands lower until they reached her breasts.

Fuck, her nipples were rock hard under my gaze and tightened further when I ran my hands roughly over her breasts, groping each one in my palms.

I rolled each nipple between my finger and thumb, making them longer and fuller, and as I did so, she gasped and closed her eyes.

I moved behind her and pulled her back against my chest and then returned my hands to her soapy breasts. As she leaned her head back against my shoulder, I could see the arousal on her face, and I moved my hands down over her smooth belly until I reached the strip of dark hair on her mound.

She had been waxed, probably on the morning of the wedding in preparation for her first night as my wife. The beautician had left a narrow strip of hair on either side of her slit, teasing me with its silky darkness, calling me to run my fingers through it and discover the secrets it hid.

The white body wash contrasted perfectly with her dark nipples and dark pussy hair. I moved my hands around the tops of her thighs, parting her legs a little and stroking the delicate skin of her inner thighs.

Her eyes were shut now, and I watched her face as my fingers finally glided over her outer labia before parting her inner lips and finding her clit swollen, erect and soaked with her arousal.

She gave a small cry as my fingers touched that bundle of nerves. By now her eyes were tightly shut.

“Look at me,” I commanded.

Reluctantly she opened her eyes, her cheeks flamed in embarrassment.

This was the first time her pussy had been touched by a man, but I wasn’t going to go easy on her. “Keep your eyes on mine, otherwise I’ll stop. I want to watch you.”

After a pause, when I was sure that she wasn’t going to close her eyes again, I carried on exploring her clit, working it with my fingers before running my fingertips back to the entrance of her pussy.

By now the body wash had rinsed off under the spray of the shower. I alternated between playing with her pussy lips and rubbing her clit in small circles. As the tension coiled in her body and her folds became more slippery, she closed her eyes.

“No. Look at me,” I ordered, my voice hard with need, and I stopped my fingers from moving until she fixed her gaze back on me.

As she approached her climax, her breaths came in quick pants, and she had her palms pressed up against my muscled thighs behind her.

She was struggling to keep her legs standing and I wrapped my other arm tightly above her belly, feeling her heavy, naked breasts resting on my forearm.

I felt her muscles tense and, as she clung desperately to my forearm wrapped around her, she screamed out while I worked my fingers relentlessly on her clit, not stopping when she tried to push my hand away. I

sharply inhaled, feeling her pussy entrance flood with moisture as she came at my hands.

I continued to massage her clit until I had wrung out every last bit of her cries and spread her pussy's juices over her entire labia.

Her legs had buckled, and I was holding her up against my body with my strong arms. Her eyes were closed now and, as her breaths started to return to normal, she froze as if realizing what had just happened.

She spun around and opened her eyes, tearing herself from my embrace and backing up against the glass wall.

"You said it would just be a shower," she hissed at me, pushing past me and running out of the shower. She nearly slipped on the wet floor but managed to right herself, grabbing a towel as she escaped to the bedroom.

I let her go. She needed a few minutes to calm down, and I needed to take care of my aching cock. I grabbed some more body wash and soaped my throbbing erection, leaning back against the cool tiled wall as I imagined that it was her juicy pussy that was gripping my cock hard and replaying in my mind the sound of her screaming as she came.

It didn't take me long to climax like this, and I sighed heavily as I spurted my thick, white cum onto the tiled wall before watching the shower water wash it away.

Satisfied for now, I turned off the water and dried myself off. I threw the towel onto the counter and walked back naked into the bedroom, where I found Juliana already in my bed.

JULIANA

After barely drying myself, I grabbed some new nightclothes and dressed as quickly as possible with my shaking hands.

Once I was dressed, I leapt under the covers and lay there, a quivering wreck.

What had he just done in there? What had I just let him do? My cheeks burned with shame and embarrassment—I had orgasmed at the hands of my captor.

My mind and body had betrayed me, allowing him to do that to me. I was horrified by the effect he'd had on my body and how easily he's manipulated me.

A few minutes later, while still trying to hold back the tears that were threatening to fall, I heard him come back into the bedroom.

He put on a clean pair of boxer briefs and got into bed. My back was turned to him so I didn't have to watch him, and I lay on the edge of the bed, as far away from him as possible, just as I had on my first night here.

Lying down, he slung his arm around my torso and pulled me back toward the center of the bed into his embrace, just as he did each night now.

"Let me go," I rasped, struggling against him and trying to free myself from his hold.

"No. You are mine. When will you understand that?"

"You said it would just be a shower. I never agreed to…to that, to what you did in there."

"To me touching your pussy and making you come?"

I felt my cheeks heat in anger and embarrassment at his crude words.

"You could have stopped me at any time. I didn't hear you protesting. You were too busy screaming. I like a girl who's noisy in bed."

“You don’t play fair,” I said, feeling my cheeks go even redder at his mention of my screams. I had never orgasmed like that at my own fingers, but somehow, he had completely unraveled me.

“I’m not a good man. I never said I play fair. You wanted that as much as I did.”

I remained silent. I couldn’t talk about this with him.

“Look, you’re still a virgin if that matters to you. I didn’t take that—and I won’t until you beg me to.”

“I’ll never beg you,” I retorted.

“We’ll see.” Even though I was facing away from him, I could hear the smirk in his voice.

I continued trying to get out of his hold and managed to ram my elbow back into his chest, but he hardly seemed to feel it.

“Stop,” he said, rolling me onto my back and grabbing both my wrists, restraining them over my head. His hard body was over mine and his bare, thick thighs were pinning my legs to the mattress. “Do you want to carry on teasing me, or do you want to stop and go to sleep? Either is fine with me, beautiful.”

I froze. I realized there was no escape for me tonight, so I took a deep breath and slackened my tense muscles. “I want to sleep,” I whispered, no longer having the energy to argue with him.

My physical weakness as a woman frustrated me. He let go of my wrists and pulled me back into his arms. I let him do this, knowing that fighting would get me nowhere. Instead, I closed my eyes and willed sleep to take me to a place of oblivion.

MARCO

She didn’t struggle tonight to stay awake. I think she wanted sleep to come so that she could get away from me—and what had happened in the shower tonight.

I felt her finally relax in my arms as she drifted off into sleep. I listened to her gentle breathing.

For fuck’s sake, I could her dog snoring as well.

I let my mind wander back to our shower, to her deliciously responsive body. She had wanted it as much as I had.

I had never forced a woman, and I wouldn’t force her. There would be no challenge in that, and I liked a challenge.

No, I didn’t want just her body. I wanted her mind and soul too.

***

My eyes blinked open, and my hand flew to the weapon beside me.

My finger was poised on the trigger.

I clicked on the light on my nightstand, checking the room and at the same time ensuring that Juliana was still beside me where she should have been.

Like I always did on nights like these, I reached for my phone and checked the security feeds and logged into the guard reports to see if there had been any unusual activity over the last few hours.

But, as always, everything was just fine. Everything that was, except for me.

I knew what had woken me up—and it wasn't anything going on in the house or on the estate.

I had been woken by what was going on in my mind.

I had been dreaming again about the day our mom died. Fuck, just thinking about it made me so angry. Worse, it made guilt attack my soul.

I looked across at Juliana. I wouldn't have liked to have stayed in bed with her, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to sleep after my nightmare. It was 3.45 a.m. but I got up to start my day. There was always plenty of work to do, and I was glad to have that to take my mind off things.

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CHAPTER 18

MARCO

The next morning, after we woke, Juliana did her best to ignore me.

After getting dressed, I went to leave the bedroom as usual. But this time I stopped at the bedroom door and held it open, signaling for Juliana to go in front of me.

She looked at me, puzzled. “I thought we were having breakfast first before going on the dog walk?”

“Yeah, we’ll have breakfast first and then we’ll take him for a walk.”

“I’m being allowed to eat breakfast downstairs?” she asked with surprise.

“You’ll be going downstairs anyway for the walk, so if you have your breakfast downstairs that will save me a trip up with your tray.”

JULIANA

I tried to hide my excitement as I walked out of the bedroom for the first time in days. My pooch followed on my heels. He seemed as excited as me to see us leaving the room together.

When we got downstairs, we went to the main living area. Today I took a better look around me. Alessio and Debi were sitting around the big kitchen island eating breakfast, while Camillo and Danio were playing a video game on the big screen in front of the couches.

“Hey, it’s too early for that. Switch that game off and come have your breakfast,” said Marco as he walked toward the couches. I bet he didn’t ever say that it was too early for killing.

Debi gave me a shy smile. “Hi, Juliana. Me and Danio got some things for Mr. Fluffy yesterday. Do you want to see?” she asked eagerly.

“Sure, I’d love that.” Maybe Debi could be an ally and I should be trying to make a friend of her. Before I started on breakfast, I looked through the things that Debi and Danio had got from the pet store. There was a dog bed, dog toys, and a ball thrower that would come in handy when we took him for walks.

“These are great, Debi. Thank you so much for getting these. My sister was supposed to send his things over after the wedding but, you know, other things must have distracted her.”

“I’m heading out—I’ve got some business to take care of,” said Alessio, pushing his chair back and getting up. “It’s like fucking doggy daycare in here,” he muttered, stepping over the new dog equipment and toys.

Ignoring him, I sat down at the kitchen island and Marco passed me some homemade pancakes. I poured myself a cup of coffee and dug into my

breakfast.

MARCO

After breakfast, we took the dog into the gardens for his morning walk, when I could finally get him out of the kitchen. “Come on, Mr. F, are you coming or not?” If you asked me, the dog needed some training about following orders.

As soon as the dog was through the back door, he ran off madly, doing a large circle and then coming back to Juliana. She bent down to him and ruffled his ears. Then he took off again around the garden, stopping every now and again to chase his own tail around in smaller circles.

I looked at his antics. “That dog is a maniac.”

“It takes one to know one,” Juliana shot back at me.

I felt the corner of my mouth lift in a small smile.

“So, did you always want to be a killer?” she asked me.

I chuckled. “You’re very direct when you want to be. And, yes, I always knew I would be a Made Man and a killer—although we only kill those who deserve it.”

“How very noble of you,” she said dryly.

“And what did you want to be when you were growing up? A doctor, to heal all the men tortured by the Società?” I said mockingly.

“No, of course not.” She hesitated. “Actually, I wanted to work with animals and be a veterinary nurse.”

“Ah, so I wasn’t far off with my guess. Although instead of helping humans, you see animals as being more worthy of your care.”

She looked across at me as we walked. “I used to volunteer at a dog shelter in L.A. It was something worthwhile to do and I enjoyed it.”

“I’m not really an animal person,” I declared.

“Yeah, I kinda figured,” she murmured.

I didn’t know if it was being outside in the fresh air and among the gardens and trees or if it was because we were starting to get used to each other, but today felt more relaxed, even after what happened last night.

Being outside with her dog seemed to relax Juliana. The estate’s grounds were huge, and we followed the dog who seemed to already have a good sense for his way around the gardens, no doubt due to the long walks that Debi and Danio had been taking him on.

Juliana had brought the ball thrower with her and when the dog returned to her and started jumping at the thrower, she threw the ball for him to retrieve. “I can’t tell you how good it feels to be outside,” she said, as she raised her face to the sun and let her skin drink in the warmth of its rays.

“I don’t really spend as much time out here as I did when Danio and Debi were younger. Danio is more interested in computer games these days and Debi is always doing whatever girls like to do.”

For most of our time outside we walked in silence. But it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. Juliana was enjoying the feeling of being outside and it was with reluctance that she headed back to the bedroom when I said it was time to go back in.

We walked back via the front of the house. “Why do you have the Virgin Mary here on your front lawn? You’re hardly the pious kind, are you?”

I looked at the stone statue. “When we moved to this house, Debi wanted to bring the statue from my parents’ house. I had it brought here for her.” My memories caught in my throat for a moment, causing an unwanted wave

of emotion before I mentally shook myself. “It took six guys to move the fucking thing.”

“You shouldn’t blaspheme the Virgin Mary.”

“I’m not blaspheming Mary, just the stone she’s made of. Anyway, I’ve grown to like her for some reason. She makes the place feel like home.”

She looked carefully at me. “She’s someone to watch out for you guys?”

I looked away from her. “I don’t need anyone to look out for me. But I do like the thought of her taking care of my siblings.”

***

Later that morning, a knock sounded at my door, and I looked up to see Anni. She was the wife of my cousin, Lorenzo.

“Hi Marco,” she chirped.

She came in and sat in the chair in front of my desk. As usual, she was dressed in her own quirky way. Her cobalt-blue dress had puffy sleeves and a green trim, and she wore it with Converse sneakers, while her white-blonde hair was styled in its usual short bob. She completely rebelled against being a typical Mafia wife, both in terms of looks and attitude.

“It’s customary to wait to be invited into someone’s office.”

“It’s okay. I know you don’t go in for social niceties and would probably have just left me standing in the doorway, so I invited myself in. I have something I want to talk to you about.”

I checked the time. “Where the fuck is Lorenzo? He’s supposed to be meeting me now.”

“He’s still in the car, on a call to someone about some issue. He said to tell you he’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Given that my cousin hadn’t yet graced me with his presence, I didn’t really have an excuse to get rid of his wife. “What did you want to talk about?” I asked carefully.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t be at the wedding, but you know how everyone thought it wouldn’t be that safe.”

“No problem. I’m glad you weren’t there given what happened.”

She nodded. “Yeah, about that…Lorenzo tells me you’ve brought the girl home with you.”

“And?” I barked. Anni wasn’t shy about saying what was on her mind, and I knew that I should just get this conversation over and done with as quickly as possible.

She sighed. “Look, I know that there are no girls in the Fratellanza you’re attracted to, and I know that you probably feel you’re at the age where you want to settle down, but there are better ways to find a girl than by *kidnapping* one.”

“I didn’t kidnap her. She was mine as soon as she signed the contract. I just took what belonged to me.” My tone was abrupt and held a dark edge, but Anni didn’t let that deter her.

“You know that mine and Lorenzo’s engagement and wedding didn’t exactly run smoothly, and then we struggled with our marriage at the start.”

“Your point is?” I gritted out.

“I just think that marrying a girl you’ve got through kidnapping is a really bad idea. Especially as there are easier ways to find a girl.”

“And what are these easier ways?” I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation with her.

Anni beamed her sweet smile at me. “Online dating apps.”

“Anni, I don’t think—”

“I knew you would feel too shy to set up a profile, so I’ve already done one for you.” She thrusted her cell phone at me. “Here, take a look. And before you start complaining about our Mafia world and the need for secrecy and blah, blah, blah, just read it and you’ll see that I’ve managed to make no mention of your badman ways.”

I looked at the screen and I saw the name ‘Mervin.’

“Er, who’s Mervin, and what’s he got to do with me?”

“That’s your alias. I just thought that you might want to avoid using your real name, but I made your alias something similar to your real name so that it wouldn’t feel weird being called it.”

“No, being called Mervin doesn’t sound weird at all,” I said drily.

“Click on your name and it’ll bring up your profile.” Anni was bubbling over with annoying enthusiasm. I was beginning to wonder how Lorenzo, who was a grumpy asshole at times, managed to put up with her on a daily basis.

Against my better judgment, I tapped on the screen, my eyes widening as I saw a photo of me looking back. A photo of me…with a dog. “What the fuck is this?”

“Male dating profiles get more hits if the man has his kid or pet in the photo with him. And it’s not just a myth—I wouldn’t just blindly believe something that I’ve read. I’ve studied various raw data and calculated that the statistical probability of a profile click is thirty-seven percent higher for a man if he has a child or animal in his profile picture.” Christ, why did my cousin have to marry a math nerd? Couldn’t he have just married a dumb blonde?

I looked back down at the photo. “Mr. Fluffy isn’t my pet,” I snapped.

“I know, but Danio told me that you have a dog in the house, and so I thought why not use the dog in your profile photo. Genius, right?”

“No, *not genius*. I don’t recall ever having my picture taken with that dumb animal, and the photo makes me look like I’ve got a stick up my ass.”

“Lorenzo always says that Danio is the tech guru in the family, so I got him to photoshop you and Mr. Fluffy into a photo together. Danio said he couldn’t find a recent photo with you smiling, and this was the photo he found where you looked the least murderous and stabby. It’s bad online dating etiquette to use an old photo, so we just went with the best recent one we could find.”

“And using a fake name, plus photoshopping a picture to make it look like I adore dogs, isn’t ‘bad online dating etiquette’, right?”

Anni narrowed her eyes at me. “You could at least give this a chance after all the trouble I’ve gone to. You haven’t even read the profile yet.”

I scrolled down the screen to read what she had written about me. It was all generic bullshit and didn’t sound like me at all. Under hobbies, she’d written: ‘Loves people, loves pets, and loves smiling.’

What the *actual* fuck?

At that moment, Lorenzo finally made an appearance. “Marco, I got delayed—”

He came to a halt when he saw me holding Anni’s phone.

His eyes lasered into his wife. “Anni, you didn’t show him the dating profile, did you?” he barked. “I told you to delete it.”

“I don’t take my orders from you, Lorenzo,” she said obstinately.

“Sorry about this, Marco.” He yanked Anni out of the chair and practically pushed her out of the door. “We’ve got a tennis match scheduled

for after work—I'll see you there and deal with you then," he growled at her before shutting the door and turning back to me.

I silently pushed Anni's phone back across the desk to him.

"I'll get it deleted, Marco. She means well. I told her you're a coldhearted bastard and she shouldn't waste her time on you, but she can't help caring. She's just worried about things not working out between you and the girl and you being lonely."

"Can we talk about something other than my fucking love life?" I fumed at him.

"Sure thing, boss."

As we talked about business, I couldn't help thinking about what Anni had said about kidnapping not being the best start to a marriage.

But then I brushed those thoughts aside. I wasn't the one who'd started this war, and I wasn't the one who was going to show mercy.

***

I took Juliana her lunch into the bedroom again, but I hoped that it didn't feel as claustrophobic now that she had been allowed outside this morning.

That evening I came and collected Juliana and took her downstairs for dinner. "I'll take you and Mr. F outside after dinner for a walk."

"Mr. F?" Juliana looked puzzled at my new name for her dog.

"Debi doesn't like me calling the animal 'Dog'. I'm not sure why, but to please her I'll call him 'Mr. F' instead." I wasn't going to call any animal

‘Mr. Fluffy’, not for anyone. I mean, I was a Made Man and a Capo, and I had a reputation to maintain.

Downstairs, we all sat around the kitchen island to eat. Dinner was a rich lasagna with grilled Mediterranean vegetables on the side. “Alessio, your lasagna is my favorite,” exclaimed Debi, when she saw what was for dinner.

“That’s why I cook it so often,” Alessio said with a smile at Debi.

“You cooked this?” Juliana asked, probably surprised that a Made Man could cook as well as this.

Alessio merely nodded, but Camillo added, “Alessio and Marco learned to cook when us kids moved in with them.”

“Zip it, Camillo,” I snapped. Juliana didn’t need to know all the details of our family life. I wondered if I would have been so secretive had we actually got married.

The rest of the meal was just casual conversation, talking about Danio and Debi’s school and talking about sports. Our family was huge baseball fans, even Debi. While we were eating, I noticed Juliana trying to look around, probably for possible escape avenues. I whispered into her ear, “There’s no way to escape, beautiful, so save your efforts. You’ll need all your strength for later tonight.”

I saw her face go pale. I liked to toy with her like a cat toying with a mouse, and I’m sure my words left her wondering what I expected from her tonight.

After dinner, I got up and looked to Juliana. “Come on, let’s get the dog walk over and done with.”

She called Mr. F and together we took him for his evening walk through the gardens.

We walked to the area which we called the fruit orchard. “It’s nice here, tranquil,” remarked Juliana. “What are these trees?”

“They’re a mixture of cherry, apple, pear, and plum trees. Danio and Debi loved coming out to pick the fruit from the trees when they were younger. It’s always been one of my favorite places on the estate.”

Mr. F ran up to us and stood looking at me with his ball in his mouth. “He wants to play fetch,” Juliana told me.

“You better get on with it then. Dealing with animals and their slobber-covered toys is beyond my pay grade.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Fluffy, I’ll play with you,” giggled Juliana as she ran off between the trees while Mr. F chased after her to get his ball back. It was one of his favorite games it seemed.

I followed them deeper into the orchard. Turning back in a circle and not looking where she was going, Juliana ran straight into me, stumbling as she lost her balance.

I caught her in my arms before she fell completely, and I held her tightly clasped against my chest.

She had been laughing, but as my eyes blazed into hers, her smile faltered.

JULIANA

My smile faltered as his silvery gray eyes blazed into mine. His sleeves were rolled up revealing his thick forearms dusted with dark hair. He was so close to me that I could smell his clean, masculine scent with its hint of musk and lemongrass.

I don’t remember how it happened, but I felt the sudden sensation of his warm lips pressing gently against my mouth.

I tried to pull back, but he held me firmly in place and pulled me tighter against him. His body heat scorched me through our clothes, telling me how much he wanted me.

My mind stopped. I knew he was dangerous and this was madness. But I couldn’t think as I felt a haze drift over my mind and spread down through my limbs.

MARCO

She froze when my lips met hers and she tried to pull away.

She seemed shocked and I knew that she had never been kissed before and I would have to take my time with her.

Although I held her tightly to me, I kept my lips gentle on hers. At first, she didn’t respond.

But then I felt her body soften in my hold and I saw her eyes slowly close as she savored the sensation.

As she relaxed, I gently coaxed her lips with my tongue, and I felt them part as she gave a soft moan. That moan went straight to my cock, and I knew that soon I wanted to hear her moaning as she writhed naked under me in my bed.

As her lips parted in the moan, I slipped inside her mouth and stroked her tongue gently with mine. She tasted of sweetness and innocence. Her scent intoxicated me, making desire blaze through my body.

I continued coaxing her tongue until I felt a small response from her as her tongue hesitantly met mine. A surge of triumph coursed through my body as I felt her attraction to me.

Her small hands, which before had been pushing against me, were now resting tentatively against my chest. She was pushing her body into mine, making small sighs as I took her with my mouth.

I took my time with her, letting the passion slowly seep from my body into hers. I didn’t want to break her. I wanted her to bend and come willingly to me.

When I finally pulled away, I could see her cheeks were flushed and her lips swollen. She looked confused, so I gently took her hand. “Come on, let’s get you inside,” I said in a low voice.

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CHAPTER 19

JULIANA

We didn’t talk as he led me back inside.

Mr. Fluffy followed behind us as Marco took me upstairs.

He had kissed me for the first time…and I had let him.

My mind was frozen. I couldn’t understand what was happening between us. He was my captor and I had just let him kiss me.

I had told myself after the shower yesterday that it had just been my body responding physically to his touch. But the kiss today had taken over my mind and left me wanting more. It had seemed different to when we had been in the shower together and, somehow, even more intimate.

While he kissed me, I had been able to feel his hard muscles through his shirt and my fingers had wanted to stroke him, to feel him.

I flushed, realizing that my panties were damp and sticking to my sex and my core was throbbing from that kiss.

I pressed my fingers to my swollen lips. How could one kiss from this man reduce me to a quivering wreck and make my insides melt into liquid heat? Christ, what was wrong with me?

After he took me back into his bedroom, I was surprised by his next words to me. “Go to bed without me. I have to visit one of our hotels to deal with some business.”

I hadn’t expected that. “When will you be back?”

“Not until late. Get some sleep.”

He didn’t ask to shower together again, thank God, because I was shaken up by the kiss already and I didn’t think I could cope with that as well.

That night, it took me much longer than normal to fall asleep.

Although I tried to block out thoughts of what had just happened, my mind kept replaying the kiss over and over again, reliving every look, touch and stroke that had been exchanged between us.

I didn’t understand what was happening. I had been here barely a week and I was already starting to lose perspective.

He was probably the cruelest man in Chicago…so why had I felt like this when he had kissed me?

Then I reminded myself of things he had done for me over the last few days. He’d updated me about Jess’s condition even though he didn’t have to, and he’d let me have my dog when I knew how easily he could have sent him away or worse.

He was letting me mix with his family now and taking me for walks in the gardens. These were all things that a captor wouldn’t permit his captive.

Perhaps I had been wrong about his intentions and wrong to be afraid of him?

Despite my kidnapping and everything that had happened, I knew that I had enjoyed his company today. Worse still, I craved more of it—and more of him.

***

Later, I didn't know what time it was, but I must have been in a deep sleep when I heard my name whispered.

I woke up with a start to find a tall man standing over me. His hand was over my mouth.

Panic surged through my body. I tried to fight and pulled at the wrist of the hand clamping down on my mouth. The man was too strong for me.

"Shh. We're here to rescue you."

I stilled when I heard his words. As I fought the fogginess of my sleep-fuddled brain and my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I found myself looking into a pair of piercing blue eyes. They were eyes that were so similar to mine.

I knew those eyes: it was Jacob.

Thank God—*he had come to save me*.

As he saw the recognition appear in my eyes, he took his restraining hand away and I leapt into his arms. "Jake, oh Jake," I sobbed with relief, my initial panic subsiding, although adrenaline was quickly taking its place and electrifying all my nerves.

I noticed behind Jacob was another one of my father's men, Cornelio. Cornelio had acted as my personal bodyguard for as long as I could remember.

"No one is downstairs," whispered Jacob. "We just need to keep quiet until we get outside the perimeter gates. My men are waiting for us there. Keep behind me and don't make a sound."

I nodded, my heart in my throat. I was finally getting out of here.

Jacob and Cornelio were all dressed in black, camouflaging them in the dark. Mr. Fluffy had been woken by the movements and he pressed his snout affectionately into Jacob, recognizing his familiar scent.

There was no time for me to dress. I was barefoot and only wearing my sleep shorts and tank top.

I felt the cool night air kissing my skin as I hurried with them out of the bedroom, taking Mr. Fluffy by the collar and urging him forward.

We silently made our way down the staircase and kept as close to the wall as possible.

For a second my thoughts turned guiltily to Debi and Danio. I hoped to God that we made it out of here without any gunshots being fired.

The house was dark. I was still unfamiliar with this house and jittery with nerves. I stumbled as we came down the stairs. Cornelio was behind me and quickly righted my step.

Once outside we made our way carefully and silently through the grounds of the estate, and Jacob told me that half a mile beyond the perimeter waited two SUVs with more Società soldiers.

At night the gardens looked completely different—creepy somehow—as if the trees were watching us. It made my skin crawl or perhaps it was nerves prickling at my skin.

We would be at the estate perimeter in a couple more minutes. I was almost free.

Suddenly I was blinded, my hand flying to my squinting eyes.

As I struggled to adjust my eyes to the bright lights that had appeared out of nowhere to flood the outdoor area, I heard Marco's cold voice ring out. "Going somewhere?"

I whirled around. We were surrounded by Marco and Alessio, as well as a large number of their soldiers.

I froze. I knew this was over.

There would be no escape for me.

Nor for Jacob or Cornelio.

There was nothing the Società soldiers waiting outside the perimeter could do for us now—it would be a suicide mission for them even to attempt to help Jacob, Cornelio, and me, given the sheer number of Fratellanza men surrounding us. The Società would never be able to defeat the Marchianos on their home ground.

As I stood rooted to the spot, Marco slowly approached me as a predator would stalk toward its prey. "And there I was thinking that you would be waiting in bed for me, beautiful."

Normally that sort of crude comment from him would cause me to blush, but the horror of the situation had rendered me incapable of even that.

He roughly grabbed my arm and pulled me back toward the house. Now that I was outside, I wasn't giving up so easily.

I shoved at him and managed to slip his grasp. I took off at a run, not knowing where I was going and still barefoot.

But he easily caught me, yanking me back toward him and slamming my back against his chest, the impact making me cry out. He slung his arm

around my torso and started carrying me toward the house.

My arms were restrained under his but I could still kick back with my heels. But it didn't seem to do much good. My helplessness against him, and the prospect of escape being snatched away from me, made tears of anger sting my eyes as I watched Jacob and Cornelio being dragged away by Alessio.

When we reached the foot of the stairs he flipped me over his shoulder, further humiliating me by demonstrating his complete power over me. He easily carried me back up the staircase that I had moments ago been escaping down.

He strode back to his bedroom and after entering the room he tossed me roughly onto the bed's mattress.

As soon as my back bounced on the mattress I scrambled to sit up. I pushed myself up against the headboard, as far away from him as I could get, panting in fear and exertion.

I could see that he was furious with my rescuers. But he was also furious with me.

"What are you going to do to them? Please don't hurt them, please!"

I probably should have apologized for trying to escape. But those words wouldn't come out of my mouth—all I cared about was what was going to happen to Jacob and Cornelio.

But Marco didn't answer me.

After staring at me, he turned on his heel and left the room, locking the door behind him.

I don't know how long I sat like that in the dark, worrying about what was going to happen to Jacob and Cornelio. And what was going to happen to me?

MARCO

We took the intruders to our garage block. We walked them past the SUVs and sports cars parked on the main floor, taking them through the back into a cavernous area. This was our torture room. This was where we came to have fun.

We separated the men, putting them into different holding rooms.

As I watched Jacob being dragged into a room, he stared back at me with eyes so similar to Juliana's. And for some reason it made my fury rise further—it was as if he was taunting me with his familial bond to Juliana, telling me that she belonged to him and the Società more than she belonged to me.

I stood with Alessio and Camillo. "We'll split them up and question them to find out everything we need to know, including how they got in and how much they know about our security system." I gave a twisted smile. "And while they're here, we may as well torture details out of them about the Società's plans and dealings." My heart raced at the thought of getting my hands wet with blood.

Alessio nodded. "The Società are eager to have Juliana back, irrespective of the contract. So much so, they would risk the lives of their men."

"The fuckers—they know Juliana is mine under Mafia laws and that nothing can change that now." I would never let her go. "I'll take her brother, you two take the other guy," I ordered.

Then we set to work. Despite the late hour, all traces of tiredness had been banished from my mind and adrenaline was racing through my veins

at the prospect of spilling blood.

***

A few hours later I reconvened with Alessio and Camillo. My sleeves were rolled up and blood was on my palms, fists, and forearms.

“We’ve got all the information we need for tonight,” I said. I’d left Jacob bruised, bloodied, and battered. He’d put up a lot of resistance, but he’d eventually given up some information as he tired and the pain took over, although he’d not given up nearly as much as the other guy. Jacob would one day be an Underboss and his father had obviously trained him hard—he’d probably tortured his own son to toughen him up for his future role.

Camillo was pouring us each a glass of whiskey.

We raised our glasses. “To the Kings of Chicago,” said Alessio.

“Long live the Kings,” my voice and Camillo’s echoed.

It was our usual toast and something we needed after the shitshow of an evening we’d had. I knocked back my drink in one gulp and then wiped my hand across my mouth.

“Let’s assemble again tomorrow morning to finish things off.” Forcing information out of Jacob Bonardi had helped me get some rage out of my system, but I still had Juliana to deal with and I had plenty of rage left for her.

I made my way back into the house and up the stairs. My mind was racing. I was furious with the two Società men but even more furious with Juliana.

How could she want to go back to the family that had nearly killed her sister and could easily have killed her? They had fired their gunshots in the church with no regard for her life, but still she wanted them instead of me.

Her betrayal burned at my insides.

I owned her and it was time she understood that and learned to obey me.

It was the early hours of the morning now and it was still dark outside.

I had showered in the bathroom in the garage block, washing off Jacob's blood, before returning to the bedroom where I found Juliana curled up and asleep. She was leaning against the headboard without the comforter over her and, instead, was hugging her arms around herself.

I could see her face stained with tears. She must have cried herself to sleep like that. I lifted her in my arms and slid her body between the covers.

She stirred, letting out a low moan. "Marco? What's happened to Jake and Cornelio?" she asked, trying to sit up at the same time.

"That doesn't concern you."

She rubbed hard at her eyes. "Please, it wasn't their fault. Jake was trying to help me, please don't hurt them," she said in a rush. "They were just following orders and—"

"Quiet!" I couldn't talk about this now. "Lie down," I carried on in a harsh voice.

"Wh-What are you going to do to me?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"What do you think I'm going to do? What has that pretty little mind of yours dreamt up as a fitting punishment?" When she didn't answer, I continued. "Do you think I'm going to take you tonight? Is that what you're hoping for, that I stop showing you mercy and instead take what's mine?"

She stayed silent, her eyes wide and unblinking.

“Is your pussy creaming right now thinking about it, just like it was when we were in the shower yesterday? Did you get wet when I kissed you earlier, thinking about what else you wanted me to do?”

She must have realized how close to the edge I was because she just looked at me with those big eyes of hers, too scared to make a response.

“Lie down. Go to sleep.” I was too angry with her right now to punish her. Despite wanting, no needing, to fuck my little virgin tonight, I knew that I wouldn’t be able to control myself.

I wouldn’t hurt her in that way, especially when it was her first time. I might be a monster, but even I had my limits.

She looked unsure but knew better than to defy me in my current state. She slowly slid down under the covers while keeping her eyes on me.

I stripped off my clothes and climbed into bed beside her, for once not taking her into my arms, and I let sleep overtake me.

She would wait until tomorrow.

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CHAPTER 20

JULIANA

As soon as I woke in the morning, the events of last night came rushing back into my mind.

I darted my eyes open and sat up quickly, at the same time looking at the other side of the bed to see if Marco was beside me.

His side of the bed was empty.

I worried about what had happened to my brother and Cornelio. I was finding it difficult to breathe as the possibilities stormed through my mind and I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to still my shaking.

I couldn’t even get up to shower. All I wanted was for my sibling to be safe. I just sat there on the bed, praying that Jacob and Cornelio would be alright, while knowing that there was no possibility that they would be.

When I thought about Marco, I couldn’t believe that only yesterday I had craved this man and enjoyed kissing him—that I’d fooled myself into forgetting everything I knew about him.

He was known as the most brutal Capo in the Mafia, and I had seen firsthand just how cruel he could be. This was a man who’d directed his men to shoot my sister, before brutally kidnapping me and ripping me away from my family and everything I knew—this was a man who would have no qualms about killing Jacob and Cornelio.

I knew in my heavy heart that my sibling wouldn’t be spared, and the thought absolutely horrified me.

***

I wasn’t sure how much later it was, but eventually Alessio arrived with my breakfast tray. Mr. Fluffy was sitting on the bed beside me, tucked up into my side as if he knew something was wrong. He had always been able to sense my moods; however, even he couldn’t soothe my frayed nerves today.

“What’s going to happen to my brother and Cornelio?” I asked Alessio as soon as he stepped through the bedroom door.

However, he did not answer and merely put my tray down on the dresser and then went to leave. I rushed toward him and grabbed his arm before he could leave the room.

“Please—it’s my brother. They don’t deserve to die because of me. They were only following orders. They would have had no choice.”

“They are Made Men. They knew the risks they were taking when they entered our territory. They killed four of our men at the perimeter to get into the grounds.”

With that, he shook his arm free from my hold and left me standing there. I ignored the tray of food and sank back onto the bed, giving in to my tears. I didn’t care if my crying showed weakness.

Two men would die because of me, my brother would die because of me. My conscience had never felt so heavy, and my heart ached when I thought about what I would lose.

MARCO

I reconvened with Alessio and Camillo in the morning. “We’ll leave the Società men to fester in their own juices for the day.”

That way, their imaginations would further torture them, coming up with scenarios of how they would die at our hands. Further threats were not needed from us when they could easily imagine their fates.

With the mood I was in, I couldn’t face Juliana today. I had woken early this morning and left her sleeping in bed. “Alessio, take Juliana’s meals to her today. I’ve got other things to take care of.”

Alessio nodded and wisely did not question me over this. It was better that I did not face Juliana when I was in this state, and Alessio knew me well enough to understand this.

Instead, I took out some of my aggression in our gym room fighting Camillo or, more accurately, kicking his ass. Unfortunately, Camillo was

not as perceptive as Alessio, and he didn't know when to keep his mouth shut.

With three Made Men living in the house, and Danio in training for his initiation, it made sense to install our own gym in the mansion.

When we had moved in, we'd converted part of the ground floor into our gym. It held our fitness equipment and weights, and we also had an area for fight and knife training. We needed to train every day, and it had meant that Alessio and I could spend more time at home when my siblings were younger and needed us more.

Camillo was the gym junkie of the family and was bigger and had more muscles than the rest of us. He was a scary fucker with his huge size, thick neck and arms, and countless tattoos. But he was a big softie around his siblings, particularly with Debi and Danio.

Camillo would win a battle based on brute strength, but I was quicker on my feet during fights, which meant that we always had a good sparring match against each other. Today, however, he was no match for me in my current fury.

"I thought that this marriage was supposed to bring some peace to the Fratellanza," huffed Camillo, breathing hard after I had knocked him to the ground once again during our fight training.

"We didn't get married," I snapped. I wasn't in the mood to talk about Juliana.

"Yeah, but you know what I mean. What's the point of her being here if we haven't even got an alliance with the Società now?"

"I own her now and I've owned her since she signed that contract. I wasn't going to let them take away something of mine."

“But Juliana has done the opposite of bringing peace. Ever since she’s arrived, either you’ve been in a bad mood and majorly pissed over that girl, or you and Alessio have been arguing over that fucking dog.”

“How about less chat and more training?” I growled. “If you spent as much time planning your moves as you do yakking, you might be able to land a few more blows on me.”

“Have you fucked her yet?” Camillo had the subtlety of an elephant.

“For fuck’s sake, are we girlfriends now?” I snapped. “What gave you the fucking impression that I want to share details?”

Camillo merely shrugged. “I’m just saying, maybe that would make you less pissed off all the time?” He just didn’t know when to shut his trap.

“Christ, Camillo, you’re really fucking irritating sometimes. You would try the patience of a fucking saint.”

Camillo raised one eyebrow at me. “You being the saint, I take it?”

“Yeah, me being the saint,” I huffed. I knew, as did Camillo, that I was as far from a saint as any man could be.

***

After finishing my workout and showering, I returned to my bedroom.

Juliana was sitting on the bed, her hair disheveled, looking distraught. As I entered, she looked up at me, her face creased with worry and exhaustion.

“So, your brother thought he’d be the hero and come rescue you? How sweet.” I gave a harsh laugh. “Did he really think he’d get in and out of our estate undetected?”

“Wh-what did you do to him?” she stammered.

“What do you think? I made him talk, of course. I made him spill some delicious Società secrets—although he needed some convincing to speak, but I was happy to give him that encouragement.”

Her face blanched. She knew I had tortured him. “What’s going to happen to him now? And Cornelio?” she whispered.

I was silent for a short while, before finally speaking. “That’s up to you.”

“You can have me—I’ll give myself to you. I’ll stop fighting you.” She forced the words out. “Please just let them go. Please just let Jake be okay.” She couldn’t bear it if anything happened to her sibling.

“So, you’ll give yourself to me in exchange for their lives?”

“Yes.” She swallowed hard. “Yes, I will.”

I gave a twisted smile. “I already own your body and your life. You are mine now. You don’t get to decide to give me yourself to me. I already have it, it’s already in my hands: your body, your life, your fate.”

I watched a blanket of confusion settle over her features. “I don’t understand. I’m giving you all that I have to give. What else do you want from me?”

I didn’t take my eyes off her. “I’m not giving the choice of surrendering your innocence in exchange for their lives. The choice I’m giving you is that you will decide who gets killed.”

Her breath exhaled on a gasp. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“The choice I’m giving you is this. Who dies—either your bodyguard or your brother.” My voice was harsh and uncompromising.

“I won’t condemn a man to his death.” She tried to make herself sound strong, but she couldn’t stop the wobble in her voice.

“Choose who will die, (a) your bodyguard or (b) Jacob.”

“I can’t,” she replied in horror, her knuckles white as she clenched her hands around the bedsheets.

“Of course you can. It’s an easy question. I’ve even made it multiple choice to make it even easier for you to answer: you just need to say (a) or (b),” I smirked.

“I can’t…”

“If you can’t decide, I can give you a coin. You can toss it to make the decision.” My tone was flippant, not giving a care to her feelings or emotions.

“I won’t do that,” she said in a slightly louder voice.” I won’t be involved in any decision about who to kill.”

“But you will be involved.” I was silent for a few, long seconds. She wasn’t going to escape making this choice, no matter what she did. “Because if you don’t choose one, then they will both die.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” she cried out, the tears she had been holding back finally running down her face.

“You know why.” I glowered at her. “You are mine now. And the Società needs to know that. They can never have you back as long as I want to keep you. The only time they can have you back is if I decide to hand you over to them. Until then they need to learn their fucking lesson.”

“I’ll talk to them, I’ll talk to Jake, I’ll tell them that once you let them go, they can never come back. Please!”

“You know begging doesn’t work on me. You have five seconds to make up your mind—Jacob or Cornelio. If you don’t give me your answer, then both will die.”

“Please don’t do this,” she sobbed.

“Five…four—”

“I’m begging you, please!”

“Three…two…”

“I want to save Jake!”

“No.” My voice was hard. She’d told me who to save. “I asked you which one *to kill*.” I wanted her to say his name so that she would always remember which one she had condemned to death and what the consequences would be if she ever tried to escape again.

She gulped. “Cornelio,” she whispered through her tears. “I choose Cornelio.”

Without a backward glance, I turned on my heel and strode out of the room.

***

That afternoon, Alessio and I visited the grieving families of the four perimeter soldiers killed by the Società men last night.

I turned to Alessio as we left the last home we needed to visit. “It feels like we’ve done this too many times lately.”

Alessio nodded. “Too many good soldiers have died lately at the hands of the Società Mafia. They’ll fucking pay for this.”

By the end of the day, I was in a filthy mood. Torturing the two Società men yesterday had done little to allay my fury, nor had training with Camillo until the sweat was pouring off me. Right now, I could think of only one thing that might soothe me.

After telling Alessio and Camillo to meet me in the garage block after dinner, I made for my SUV.

***

I grabbed a burger from a drive-through and, twenty minutes later, I pulled up outside the Tocchini house.

Alfonso Tocchini was one of my soldiers and his family had worked for the Fratellanza for many generations, first in Italy and then here in the US.

He lived with his mother, wife and two children in a small house in a quiet Chicago suburb.

His son also worked for us in the organization, but the person who had first drawn me to the family was his fifteen-year-old daughter, Carolinne. She was the same age as Danio, and they were in the same class at school and had been best friends since they started kindergarten.

Carolinne had been seven years old when she had been shot by the Bratva in a drive-by shooting. She and her family had been entering a Fratellanza-owned hotel, attending a family celebration after the christening of a cousin.

The bullet had hit her chest and she had required extensive surgery to repair the internal damage. I'd only been Capo for a short while at that time. It had been my responsibility as Capo to keep the Fratellanza and their families safe, and I had blamed myself for this little girl getting shot.

I had visited the family a number of times during that period to check on how Carolinne was doing. One time they invited me to stay for dinner. I

declined, but Carolinne's grandmother insisted, and I accepted so as not to offend the older Italian woman.

That evening had been a bit of a revelation. It had seemed like the most normal family dinner I'd ever had and completely unlike any experience I had with my parents during my childhood.

It was just like you would see in the movies: a mom and pop, with a cheeky son and angelic daughter, and their grandmother, Nonna, fussing in the background and heaping up the plates with second servings of her homemade ravioli.

But what really got me was the love and lack of tension. Even though Alfonso was a Made Man, he kept that persona out of his family home and away from his loved ones. At home he was just a regular dad and husband.

My father had been the complete opposite. Every family meal included reminders of our duties to the Fratellanza and talk of vendettas and violence. My mother had cowered in fear and us older children had hated our father and his cruel ways.

The Tocchini household was how I would want my own children to be raised one day. Although Alessio and I were doing an okay job of raising Camillo, Danio, and Debi, I was painfully aware that they were missing out on having a mom, and I regularly felt guilt about that.

After that first dinner at the Tocchini house, I had set up cameras and listening devices in their home. I told myself that I wasn't really a stalker. It was just that watching them always made me feel calm and sort of happy. It was my bit of escapism.

I unwrapped my burger and settled back in my car to watch and listen to the Tocchinis via my laptop.

Tonight was their night for take-out. This was always my favorite night. Their Nonna cooked every night, and it was always an Italian dish. Once a week, however, they had what she called ‘American food’: they had take-out pizza.

Nonna always chose a Hawaiian pizza, with ham and pineapple, from the take-out menu. Then every week, while she happily devoured every last slice, she would give her regular commentary. “Mamma mia, these Americans, they are barbarians. They put a pineapple on a pizza, and they say this pink rubbish is ham. Huh, the Americans wouldn’t know proper ham even if a pig came up and snorted in their faces”.

Tonight, she started on her grandson and the need to marry well. “You need a good Italian girl to marry so that you get proper Italian food instead of getting American pizza cooked in the microwave every night.’

I guffawed at that particular comment—she was a real gem. I ate my burger as I listened to them talk, and it was like I was having dinner with them again. They didn’t talk about anything important, but that was the point—it was just normal.

As the family finished up their meal, I checked my watch and sighed when I saw that it was time to get back. Tonight’s dinner with the Tocchinis hadn’t soothed me like it normally did.

I drove back to our estate, and as I parked up, Alessio strode over to me. “I was wondering where you’d gone,” he said, checking his watch.

“I’m here now, aren’t I?” I growled.

“Let me guess,” he drawled. “You’ve been having some *Tocchini Time*, haven’t you?” referring to the name he had given my secret visits.

“So, what if I have?”

“Marco, you know it’s stalking, right?”

“No, it’s not,” I shot back. “Carolinne is practically family given that her and Danio are best friends and are just about joined at the hip.”

Alessio quirked an eyebrow at me.

“Anyhow, I never watch them or listen to them except during their dinners. It’s just like someone relaxing by switching on the TV to watch the next episode of their favorite show, or like watching online videos of cute kittens.”

Alessio sighed and shook his head at me. “You just keep telling yourself that.”

“Yeah, I will,” I snapped back at him.

Alessio looked long and hard at me.

“What now?” I said, getting more irritated by the second.

“Do you think that maybe you’re getting too wrapped up in the whole Juliana thing?”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“She’s obviously getting to you, or at least the situation is. And the Società is targeting our estate now—I don’t want the kids put in that sort of danger. It’s all too close to home for my liking and too close to our loved ones.”

“It goes with our world,” I said shortly. “Anyhow, you know I would never let anything happen to Debi or Danio.” My voice became quieter. “I’d lay down my life before I let anything happen to any one of you.”

Alessio, sensing the seriousness in my words, nodded back at me, satisfied.

“And after I send back Jacob Bonardi today with my little gift for the Società, they definitely won’t be trying it again.”

“Let’s hope not,” replied Alessio.

“Look, are we torturing anyone tonight or not?” I said, trying to change the subject.

“We’re ready whenever you are,” replied Alessio.

I walked toward the house.

My blood was still raging through my veins, and I knew what had to be done next.

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CHAPTER 21

JULIANA

I had finished my dinner a short time ago, barely touching any of the food on my tray. Alessio had brought my food up to me again.

I hadn’t seen Marco all day and the isolation in this room was making the thoughts go around my mind in an endless spin. Even Mr. Fluffy couldn’t distract me today.

I heard the lock turn in the door and wondered if someone had come up to take my dog outside. I stood up as the door opened and saw the one person I didn’t want to see.

Marco.

He was back.

“Juliana.” His voice was deep yet soft.

Somehow this felt worse than if his voice had been outright angry. His eyes were blank, but I knew he was more dangerous like this than if he was openly raging.

Without realizing it, I had taken a couple of steps backward as he moved into the room until the backs of my calves hit the bed. I stumbled onto the bed and put my palms out behind me to steady myself.

But he continued moving toward me.

As he came nearer, I could feel the heat radiating off his body, or was it rage rolling off him in waves? Either way, this wasn't a good time to be around him and unconsciously I cowered against the comforter.

He seized my arms in his iron grip, making me wince in pain as he hauled me to my feet.

I knew that he was going to kill me now.

Any reprieve I'd previously been allowed was now over. I struggled as he dragged me from the room, but I was no match for his strength and no match for his anger.

"Where are we going?" I cried as he tugged me down the stairs and out of the mansion. We headed toward the large garage block.

Was he driving me somewhere else to kill me? Maybe somewhere by water so that my body could easily be disposed of afterward, or a construction site where I could be dumped into a tank of concrete.

Terrified thoughts, one after another, were racing through my mind.

When we entered the garage, we walked past all the SUVs and sports cars, instead reaching a door that led to another area.

I didn't know what was in there, but I could feel the cold and damp radiating off the concrete floor and the stale air stung my nostrils. I knew that if I went in there, I wouldn't be coming back out alive.

I tried to stop him from taking me through the door, but my attempts were futile.

He stood behind me and gripped my upper arms propelling me forward. We went down a corridor and he opened another door and pushed me into a room.

This was it. I'd been brought out here to be punished and killed. I prayed the kill would be quick.

I couldn't stop my limbs from shaking and the tears from slipping down my cheeks.

Once we were inside the room, he let me go and I whirled around so that I was facing him and could see what he was doing. At the same time, I took a few steps back as if that could help me escape his clutches.

He regarded me with a twisted smile and raised one eyebrow. "You seem afraid of me," he said as he prowled toward me.

I took a step back with each step he took forward until my back hit the cold wall and I could move no further.

Then I had no choice but to be pressed up against the hard wall and I could only watch him as he moved nearer to me until he was standing right in front of me. He raised his hand to my face, and I flinched, expecting the worst.

But he ran the back of his fingers against my tear-stained cheek in the gentlest of caresses. "You don't need to be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you."

"You aren't?"

"No…not yet."

"Then why have you brought me out here?" My voice was quivering.

"You'll see."

“You’re not going to kill me yet?”

“Where would be the fun in that? But you will receive a punishment tonight.”

I didn’t know what he meant or what he was planning, but I was as terrified as I had ever been. When he took hold of my arms I screamed out.

But he merely turned me around to a blank window along one wall. He pressed a switch that looked like a light switch and in that instance the window changed so that it was no longer blank and instead we could see into what must have been the room next to ours.

In that room I saw Cornelio covered in blood and with his body bent over in evident agony. I rushed toward the window and hammered my fists against it, calling out Cornelio’s name. “Cornelio! Cornelio!”

“He can’t hear you. The room he’s in is soundproof. He also can’t see you, but lucky for us we can see him.”

I didn’t know what he had planned, but I knew that it was nothing good.

The room Cornelio was in contained a table and two chairs. On one side was a large closet but I turned my eyes away from it, not wanting to see the contents. I could imagine what it contained: weapons and implements of torture.

My whole body was cold like ice, yet I felt sweat drip down my back and between my breasts. I didn’t know how I could feel those things when I could barely breathe to get enough oxygen into my lungs.

Marco switched on what must have been an intercom and spoke to two soldiers who were in the same room as Cornelio. “Go ahead. We’re ready.”

I turned back to the viewing window, my eyes wide and holding my breath. I could no longer breathe.

Cornelio was trying to hide it, but I saw a flicker of fear on his face. He might be a seasoned soldier who had worked for my father for many years, but he knew he was staring death in the face. He was trapped and outnumbered at the hands of a cruel enemy who wanted revenge against the Società.

Marco stared at me. “I own you now, I thought you understood that. There is no escape for you, and you will never return to your family. Each time you try, more people will die because of your actions.”

“Please don’t do this. I won’t try to escape again. No one else has to die because of me. Please!”

“I already warned you when you tried to escape from your room the first time. Alas, I don’t think you learned your lesson then. I was too soft on you. I had hoped that something like this was not necessary. I was obviously wrong.”

“I understand now—I’ll do anything you ask, I promise, please...” My words were tumbling out more frantically now.

I felt bile rise up my throat. I tried to take a deep breath to quell it and keep the panic away. But it felt like trying to hold fine grains of sand in my hand—the tighter you grip, the more that keeps on spilling through the cracks of your fingers. My body was cracked now, it was no longer strong enough to keep the panic locked away in its box. The panic was tumbling out into my heaving breaths and trembling limbs.

Marco grabbed my shoulders. I tried to pull away from him. I didn’t want to watch what was going to happen next, what was going to happen because of me. But he forced me to turn toward the large window.

What I didn’t realize, however, was that the cries of pain I would hear would be even worse than what I would see.

Marco was making me watch to punish me. I understood that now. He might not beat me, but he could inflict pain on me in other ways.

I heard Cornelio cry out in anguish. One of the soldiers broke each of his fingers in turn. Then the other soldier wrenched his arm. I heard a horrific sound, and I knew he'd broken it.

I shuddered with each blow, the suffering I could hear assaulting my own ears and my own nerves. It felt like my body was collapsing, as if each strike on Cornelio's body was attacking my own body too.

Cornelio fell to the ground, and I hoped they would leave him now. "He can't take any more. I've learned my lesson, I promise I have. Please let him go!"

But Marco ignored me. I watched the soldier pull Cornelio up and punch him repeatedly in the abdomen causing him to scream out.

I could feel not just Cornelio's pain but also his isolation—knowing that no one was coming to save him.

And I was just as isolated. No one would be coming to save me either. "Please! You own me! I understand that now."

"I wish I could believe that."

The soldiers continued inflicting punishing blows on Cornelio's face and body. I heard screaming. It seemed to be coming from a distance.

I realized then it was coming from me.

It was as if the screams were taking all my energy. My legs could no longer hold me up. But Marco refused to let me sink to the floor. Instead, he held me up in his arms so that I had to watch the horror that was unfolding in the next room.

I tried to turn my head away. But he grabbed my hair and yanked my head back to the window. His grip on my hair was hurting me but I barely

noticed. Soon I couldn't see. So many tears were blurring my vision. But I could still hear the relentless blows and Cornelio's tormented cries.

I could no longer even scream. I could barely talk. But I found the words to beg Marco. I didn't think I would ever beg him for anything. But I begged him to stop this.

My hushed voice came out in gasps. "Please, no more. No more, I beg you."

But my pleas fell on deaf ears. He wasn't even affected by what was going on in the next room. He continued holding me tightly in his arms, forcing me to watch.

As a girl I had never had to go through real physical pain. But I had never been subjected to mental torture like this either. I tried to shut my brain off. But it wouldn't let me, as if it had a morbid interest in what was going to happen next.

A couple of minutes later, I realized that he was speaking into the intercom again. And suddenly he flicked the switch again and the large viewing window turned blank.

I turned my head toward him. "Is…is it over?"

"Yes. It's over."

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CHAPTER 22

MARCO

It was over for her now, but not for the guy in the other room.

But she didn't need to see the rest of it. She'd seen enough for tonight. She'd seen enough over the last week to last her a lifetime.

I was not showing her mercy. I was treating her as a Made Man should treat a woman in this world. They hadn't been brought up to witness death, but she had already seen her sister get shot at her own wedding and others get killed on the same day.

Her legs gave way under her when I let go of her and she slumped, her knees hitting the floor. Crying was a waste of time in our world. We each had our jobs to do, and we got on with it.

After taking Juliana back to my bedroom, I returned to the garage block, taking over the torture of Cornelio and letting all my anger out. Each moan

from him made my blood pump faster, each scream from him was music to my ears, and each cut to his skin was like a new triumph being bestowed upon me.

JULIANA

The next morning, I woke up in Marco's bedroom.

As usual, Marco was already up and gone.

It had been getting dark when we entered the garage yesterday. It was morning now, judging by the light coming through the windows. My memories of the previous evening felt hazy as I thought back to what had happened after the viewing window went blank…

As the window went blank and Cornelio disappeared from my sight, I knew I should try to run to him, should try one last attempt at saving him, but my legs no longer were able to hold me up.

I felt the frozen concrete floor against my calves as my legs gave way. The wetness from my tears hit the back of my hands.

After I could cry no more, Marco picked me up. I cowered from him, afraid of him and what he might do next.

But his touch was gentle, and he cradled me in his arms and whispered in my ear that everything was going to be alright now. As if anything could ever be okay again.

But I didn't have the strength to argue with him. I didn't have the strength to fight him anymore. I didn't have the strength to even cry anymore.

I let him carry me back to the bedroom, his arms around me suddenly making me feel safe.

"What happens to Jake now?" I whispered. I had to know.

He put me down by the bed, and as I stood, he undressed me, pulling my top over my arms and head. "We send him back to L.A."

My breath came out in a rush of relief. He took off the rest of my clothes.

He gently pushed at my shoulders to make me sit down on the side of his bed. He held out to me a glass of water and a small white tablet resting on the palm of his hand.

"Wh-What is it?" I asked him, fearing that he wanted to drug me.

"A sedative. It will help you sleep."

I shook my head very slightly at him. "I don't want it. Please don't make me take it," I whispered.

He looked at me for a few long seconds and then left the bedroom for a minute before coming back holding out to me a crystal glass containing amber liquid. "If you won't take the sedative, drink this instead."

"I'm not sure…" My voice trailed off in confusion. My mind was a mess.

"It's whiskey. It will calm your nerves." His voice was firm, warning me not to argue with him.

I hesitantly took the glass, the ice clinking against the sides as my fingers trembled. I took a cautious sip, never having drunk hard liquor before. It burned the back of my throat, making me splutter. That small sip was enough for me, and I held the glass back out to him.

He wrapped his fingers around mine and pushed the glass back toward me. "Drink it all." His voice was as hard as steel.

I looked up at him warily. I knew, however, that he wouldn't leave me alone until I complied with his command. I slowly drank the rest of it, trying

not to taste it and wincing as it burned. It warmed up my insides, but not the cold despair deep within my body.

Once the glass was empty, he reached for it and removed it from my hand. "Good girl," he murmured.

He gently pushed me back onto the mattress and put me to bed.

The sheets felt cold on my frozen skin. He climbed into bed next to me and wrapped his warm body around mine, making me cling to him, desperate for his comfort.

He held my head against his shoulder and stroked my hair back from my forehead, softly whispering to me and comforting me.

I couldn't recall much more than that. I didn't remember what he had said, and I didn't remember finally falling asleep.

Yesterday evening did, however, make something very clear to me. I had no power in this relationship.

He held all the power, and he had full control of me. He owned me.

***

There were no meals downstairs or dog walks in the gardens today.

Alessio brought up my meal trays and at the same time he took Mr. Fluffy outside, although I could see that he would probably rather cut off his arm than be on dog-sitter duty.

"What the hell is this dog still even doing here?" he asked, not even trying to mask his annoyance.

I turned away and didn’t answer him. I couldn’t think about anything right now except what Cornelio and Jacob had suffered.

I knew what had happened to Cornelio, even if I hadn’t been made to witness it. He was dead.

And I couldn’t feel anything except profound guilt for the role I had played in the death of a man. They said that women in the Mafia were sheltered and innocent, but yesterday I had killed a man.

I had chosen him and uttered his name to condemn him to a violent, painful end. That my choice had saved Jacob couldn’t even soothe me right now.

After picking at my breakfast and barely eating any of it, I closed my eyes again and let the sweet oblivion of sleep take over my mind. That was the only way I could stop thinking about what had happened yesterday.

After lunch I heard a knock and then something slid under the door. I paused and then walked over to retrieve it. But Mr. Fluffy beat me to it and grabbed the item in his mouth. He brought it over to me. I patted him on the head. “Good boy.”

It was a DVD and looked to be a movie about a princess falling in love with Mr. Wonderful. On it was stuck a note saying, ‘Love Debi x’. I was too old for this sort of movie now, but it was a good way to while away the time and at least it distracted me from my other thoughts.

There was a T.V. in the room but it wasn’t hooked up to receive any programs. I crossed my fingers that the DVD player worked and gave a sigh of satisfaction as I pressed play and it whirred into action.

It made me think about when Jess and I had binge-watched these sorts of movies. It was always the same kind of story—girl meets boy, girl and boy fall in love, and then after a few hiccups along the way they lived happily

ever after. I remember Jess and I talking about falling in love and wondering if it would ever happen to us. I can't believe how naïve I had been.

That evening, I didn't bother waiting for Marco and instead got undressed for bed and got in between the sheets, pulling the comforter up around my ears.

MARCO

As I stepped into the bedroom that evening, I saw Juliana's body freeze. She had her back to me and ignored my presence, but I knew she was still awake. I felt my hackles rise.

I got undressed and slid into bed behind her. When Juliana didn't move or even acknowledge my presence, I swung my arm around her waist and pulled her back into my chest like I usually did at night. I had developed a need to spoon her at night, to feel her small body protected by my larger one. She didn't fight against me to my surprise, although her body felt unnaturally stiff and tense.

I felt her skin against mine and I buried my face against her dark hair, inhaling the flowery scent. It was as if her warmth could touch the cold-blooded killer in me. And her sweet scent could displace the coppery tang of blood which was etched on my senses.

We lay like that for a couple of minutes without talking, and then I felt her silent tears drop onto my arm.

Those tears, all soft and fragile in their fluidity, were in marked contrast to my hard, solid forearm that they fell against. I wasn't usually a sensitive

guy, but her tears tonight undid me in a way that hadn’t happened in a very long time.

“Juliana?” She didn’t answer.

I hesitated but then turned her around in my arms.

She didn’t resist my hold. Taking one look at her face, I pulled her to my chest, allowing her to sob against me and grieve.

I didn’t know if she was grieving her brother’s injuries and the death of Cornelio, whom she must have known was dead by now, or whether she was also grieving the loss of her previous life—because she knew now that there was no escape from me, not ever.

There was nothing she could have said that would have changed my actions last night. There was no way that I would let her return to her family. To the monsters who’d shot their guns around her at her wedding and could easily have killed her. The monsters who had shot her very sister.

The Società were monsters of a different kind. They didn’t care about Juliana or her sister. They would have killed them if it had meant success.

I would never put any of my family in harm’s way like that. My family’s lives were worth more to me than any amount of money, territory or power.

I might have been a monster, but I was a monster who protected his family. I would tear down the world to protect those I loved.

MARCO

When Juliana’s sobbing had quietened down, I got up and went to the bathroom to get a damp washcloth.

When I returned to the bed, I gently cleaned Juliana's face. Her eyes were red and her lip was trembling, but she still looked beautiful. After I finished cleaning her face, I tossed the washcloth on the nightstand and I took her back into my arms, positioning her so that her head was resting against my shoulder. After a while, I looked at her. "Are you okay?"

She didn't reply at first, as if she was thinking things over. "I have to be, don't I?"

She remained silent after that. She didn't want to argue about what had happened, and neither did I. "I don't want you to be unhappy here," I said, stroking her arm.

After a minute, Juliana tilted her face toward mine and whispered, "I wasn't unhappy yesterday when you kissed me."

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CHAPTER 23

MARCO

I stilled.

But Juliana reached up and stroked my lips with her soft fingers before pressing her mouth gently against mine.

I hesitated for a second, not sure if I should be doing this, but then I took her head between my hands and deepened the kiss, pressing more firmly against her lips and caressing them gently with the tip of my tongue.

I pushed her back against the mattress and held myself above her on my forearms while continuing to tease her mouth. I stroked her lips with my tongue, coaxing them open finally as she sighed in pleasure.

As my tongue met hers, she put her small hands on my broad shoulders and grasped tightly.

I shifted my weight onto one arm and with the other, I ran my free hand over her camisole top, over her stomach and up over her breasts, feeling her nipples hardening against the silk and hearing her gasp as she felt my hands skim over her.

She ran her hands down my bare chest. I had to feel more of her. I dipped my head down and kissed the side of her throat, running small kisses down to her collarbone, making her arch her neck up toward me. But that still wasn't enough for me.

I continued my kisses down to her breasts, running my tongue down and sucking the silk-covered nipple into my mouth, making her cry out loud while she held my head between her hands.

"Fuck, Juliana, what are you doing to me?" I said in a voice hoarse with need. I moved back up to look into her eyes. "You should tell me to stop now because if we go any further, I won't be able to hold myself back," I warned.

"I don't want you to stop," she said quietly. I waited, but when she didn't change her mind, that was all I needed.

I wasn't a good man. I shouldn't be touching a woman in our world before our wedding day, even if she had signed a contract. But she was as tempting as a siren, and I wanted to make her mine.

I kissed her lips again, this time with fierce need, hearing her moan into my mouth as I ran my hands under her top, finally stroking her bare breasts and caressing her nipples. I couldn't wait any longer.

I pulled her top off over her head, and after gazing at those perfect tits for a moment, my eyes were drawn to the dark erect points which were calling to my mouth.

I dipped my head down, capturing one of her nipples in my mouth and sucking it so that she arched her back in ecstasy. With my other hand I rolled her other luscious nipple between my finger and thumb, making it even harder and longer.

Her eyes were closed, and her breath was coming in small pants. I removed her sleep shorts, running my hands over her legs.

I kissed a trail down over her ribcage and stomach, inhaling her unique scent until my lips met the silky dark hair of her slit.

I pushed her legs apart roughly, being driven by the scent of her pussy juices.

As her thighs parted, I was teased by the sight of her pussy lips engorged with arousal and wet in preparation for me. But she would have to wait for that. I would have to get her ready first.

I parted her labia with my fingers and took a sharp intake of breath when I saw her swollen clit offering itself to me.

I couldn’t stop myself from dipping my mouth to her clit and licking her silky folds while I tasted her sweet nectar. As my tongue connected with her clit, she cried out at the sensation and grabbed at the sheets beneath her.

I started sucking at her clit, while my hands reached up to play with her nipples and soon I was rewarded with her screams as she orgasmed on my tongue. Fuck, I was rock hard and aching to feel her tight sheath gripping me, but I needed to prepare her some more for her first time.

As she came down from her climax, she tried to push my mouth away from her sensitive clit, but I wouldn’t let her and held her down firmly as she squirmed underneath me.

“Please, it’s too much,” she cried as I continued to work my tongue between her slit.

But I didn’t let up and as she continued to struggle, I reached up again with my hands and played with her tits and soon she submitted to my tongue willingly as her need increased, until she was pleading with me again.

“I need to come, Marco, please!”

Her voice saying my name in carnal pleasure made me even harder and her gasps and cries had made my desire unbearable.

I worked my way up her body, kissing her sides and gently biting her nipples until I reached her pretty mouth which was parted in pleasure. I kissed her deeply.

“I want to make you come with my cock.” It was a question and I looked deeply into her eyes and saw her give a small nod.

I felt a surge of triumph run through me. I wanted to fuck her hard, but I held myself back. I pushed her thighs apart wider and lined my cock up with her entrance and pushed gently against it with shallow thrusts while kissing her lips and neck.

As she relaxed, I reached down with one hand and played with her clit, bringing her to climax and as she cried out, I thrust my hard rod into her spasming channel, making her cry out again and push back against me tensely as she felt the pain of my breaching her virginal barrier.

“It’s okay, that was the worst part,” I said as I held myself still to allow her to get used to me inside her.

Her eyes were wide in pain and her breathing quick and I reached down to kiss her gently and stroke her arms until she began to relax.

When her breathing had slowed down, I asked hoarsely, “Is it okay for me to move now?”

“Yes,” she whispered, and I rocked gently against her pelvis, penetrating by just one more inch at a time.

I felt her inner muscles straining to accommodate my thick cock and heard her small whimpers, and I reached down to fondle her clit again.

Gradually I worked my way into her until I was all the way in and my balls were pushed up against her sex. I moved in and out of her tightness very slowly, allowing her time to get used to my thickness before I took what I wanted.

After a while I sensed her breathing changing again as she became more aroused.

Her pussy was so wet, coating my cock with her slick juices, making her insides feel exquisite against my bare hardness.

I started to move faster, the friction of my movements stimulating her sensitive inner nerve endings and making her moan. I looked down at her eyes which were closed.

“Look at me,” I ordered. “I want to see your face when I come.”

She opened her eyes to reveal the deep blue of her irises. I picked up my rhythm, no longer able to hold back, thrusting deeply in her and driving her into the mattress.

The sound of her wetness as I pounded her and the noise of my balls slapping against her sex was almost my undoing.

As I felt my climax mounting, I felt her muscles contract around my girth and heard her scream out again as one final orgasm overcame her. She arched her back as she climaxed, gripping at my forearms, and I reveled in her expression and screams.

The pressure of her pussy muscles squeezing my shaft was too much to hold out against. Her tightness pushed me over the edge, making me come

with loud grunts as I spilled my seed inside her as her muscles continued to milk my cock.

As my breathing slowed, I pulled out of her carefully and saw her wince. I gathered her up in my arms and pulled her onto my chest.

We lay like that for a couple of minutes, our breathing hoarse and our bodies slick with our mingled sweat. Her breasts glistened under the lights from the nightstand lamps, her nipples hardening again as the sweat cooled down her skin. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

I looked down at her. "Are you alright?"

She blushed, her pretty cheeks tinged with pink, and gave a small nod in response.

I kissed her deeply on the lips. "Wait here," I ordered.

I went to the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth and returned to the bedroom. She looked embarrassed as I parted her thighs to clean her, and she tried to take the cloth from me to do it herself. "No. I'll do it," I growled.

After I had cleaned her up, I got her some Tylenol from the bathroom and made her take it with a glass of water. Then I wrapped her in my arms, and she lay there against my chest as I stroked her back. "You're beautiful," I said into her hair. And it was true—I'd never seen a woman as beautiful as her.

Tonight, I had made her body mine.

But that wasn't enough for me.

After a few minutes, I turned to her. "Tomorrow we are getting married."

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CHAPTER 24

MARCO

Last night, when I told her that we would get married the next day, she hadn't argued with me.

She knew she had lost this battle already.

I wasn't willing to risk losing her again. If the Società ever tried taking her again, there would be hell to pay. Even in the Mafia world, a wife could not be taken from her husband. I already owned her via the contract, but now I was going to make that relationship iron-clad.

When she woke up next to me, I saw her wince as she turned over. "How are you feeling? Do you need a painkiller?" I knew she must be sore after what had happened between us last night.

"I'm fine," she said, avoiding my eyes.

It annoyed me that she was lying to me. I got up and went to the bathroom to grab some more Tylenol and a glass of water.

“Here, take this.” I handed her the pill and water and watched as she took them. She didn’t argue for once.

“I need a shower,” she said after she had swallowed the pill with a sip of water. She threw off the covers and grabbed her robe before making her way to the bathroom.

The glimpse of her naked body before she got her robe on had me reliving last night. It was tempting to join her in the shower, but I thought it better to give her some space this morning, especially in view of what was going to happen later today.

A little while later I took her breakfast tray up to her. It was better that she ate breakfast in our room. I didn’t want her to make any last-ditch attempt at escaping.

When I went back up to retrieve the breakfast tray, I saw that it remained untouched. Juliana was sitting on the side of the bed gazing out of the windows. It was a sunny midsummer day, though I didn’t think she noticed that.

“You haven’t eaten your breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.” She didn’t turn her gaze from the window.

I didn’t really care whether she ate breakfast or not. I grabbed the tray and took the dog downstairs so that Danio could take it out into the gardens. After everything that had happened, I was sort of glad that she at least had that animal to keep her happy, although Alessio was still on my case about it.

A little while later, I returned to the bedroom with her wedding dress which I had purchased yesterday. It was a gorgeous gown and the

alterations needed were done overnight. Anything was possible with enough money. I gave them Juliana's previous wedding dress to get the measurements right, so I knew it would be a perfect fit.

I walked into the bedroom with Debi on my heels. Debi had asked if she could help Juliana get ready today. She had brought with her an enormous number of cosmetics and what looked like possible torture implements, although Debi reliably informed me that they were hair straighteners and curling tongs.

JULIANA

In the cold light of day, I couldn't believe that I had let last night happen.

Today I was being made to marry Marco, but last night was far worse in my mind—I had given myself to him willingly. I had wanted him to kiss me, had wanted him to touch me.

I didn't understand what was happening to me. My mind was in turmoil and shame flooded me every time I thought about what he had done to me, what I had allowed him to do.

I closed my eyes briefly, willing my mind to block out these thoughts and banish from my memory the sounds and the images of what had happened. What would my family think of me? What would the rest of the Società think of me for sleeping with the enemy? I shouldn't care, but I did.

I sunk my face into my hands, exhaling painfully. I hated my captor.

But even worse, I hated myself.

***

Late morning, I heard a knock at the bedroom door and watched as Marco came in with Debi.

Debi came over to me and gave me a hug. “We’ve brought your dress. You’re going to look so pretty,” she said excitedly. The dress was white and had a strapless bodice flowing into a narrow skirt. White was hardly an appropriate choice given last night, I thought, as I felt my cheeks heat.

I looked at the dress and tried to hide my lack of enthusiasm. I don’t know what made me give in to Marco last night, the day after he had killed my father’s men who had tried to rescue me.

Was it that I had known deep down that there was no escape and that I may as well submit to what he and I both wanted, or was it some sort of twisted attraction to Marco’s power over me? I didn’t know and my emotions had been going around in circles all morning. At least this sham of a wedding would keep me distracted for the rest of the day.

Debi was standing at my side, and she looked up at me shyly. “Juliana? Please could I be your bridesmaid, you know…if you think you might need one?”

Marco looked surprised as if he hadn’t expected Debi to ask that.

I gave a shaky smile. “I would love that, thank you. My sister, Jess, was supposed to be my bridesmaid, but you’ll do just as good a job if not better.”

“We will be like sisters after today, won’t we?” said Debi eagerly.

“Yes, sisters,” I echoed back.

“I’m really looking forward to having a sister,” carried on Debi. “I mean, I love having four brothers, but they don’t really want to talk about clothes

or make-up or stuff like that.” I hugged her and wiped tears from my eyes. Marco was watching us closely. “Why are you crying?” asked Debi, looking a little alarmed.

“Tears of happiness,” I lied. I couldn’t shatter this young girl’s innocence. The Mafia life would do that all on its own soon enough.

Marco gave me a small nod as if grateful to me for protecting Debi.

Debi and I set to work on getting ourselves ready. She gushed over my wedding dress. I barely noticed it. But she was a young girl who thought of weddings as fairytales and the groom as Prince Charming. It was better that she thought that for as long as possible.

Debi helped me with my makeup, bubbling with excitement. At least one of us was excited for today.

Mr. Fluffy did not look happy that he was not getting much attention from me this morning. Maybe his whines were because he disapproved of this union as much as I did. He was pretty perceptive for a dog, and he could probably sense my unease.

There was no veil today, nothing to hide behind, nothing to shield me from the curious stares—and I knew I would be a curiosity today. After all, my first wedding had been a bloody wedding.

Everyone would be looking at me, wondering whether it had broken me. I wouldn’t give the Fratellanza the satisfaction of seeing me broken, no matter how broken I was inside.

Debi had a pale mint green dress and wore her dark hair in a ponytail held back with a ribbon. She was going to be a heartbreaker when she was older. She was still shy, despite knowing that she had four older brothers who would tear down the world to protect her.

Later Marco came up with a bouquet of flowers for me and told us that it was time to leave for the ceremony.

“Hey, shortcake, Danio is waiting downstairs to drive you in his car.” He gave Debi a kiss on her forehead, and she gave me a little wave as she headed downstairs to Danio.

“How are you feeling now? Do you need any more Tylenol?”

“I’m fine,” I snapped. “Anyway, I thought you would be happy to see me suffering.” He gave me a strange look.

I really didn’t want to talk about last night right now. I had given away my honor before my wedding day. Even though it had been to the man I had signed a contract with, I knew it was wrong and unjustifiable that I had broken this unwritten rule.

I hadn’t obeyed the rules of our world, and I hadn’t done my duty. My family would be horrified if they found out. They and the rest of the Società would call me a slut, and they would whisper that I was *una donna svergognata*—a shameless woman.

Approaching slowly, Marco gripped my hand and tugged me over to the full-length mirror. I let him pull me along, my body not knowing how to oppose his body and its underlying threat.

He stood me in front of the mirror, towering behind me, watching our reflections. He moved my hair over one bare shoulder. I flinched as I felt his cool fingers connect with my neck.

“Easy,” he breathed. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

He slowly removed the diamond pendant I had put on with the dress. It was the necklace I had worn on my first wedding day, the necklace that had been a gift from my parents on my eighteenth birthday.

I watched as he reached into his tuxedo jacket and withdrew a long narrow velvet box. He opened it, revealing a new necklace which he took out and draped around my neck. His touch was gentle, somehow incongruous with his large brutal hands.

He placed the chain along my throat, moving his hands slowly while his eyes were locked on mine.

I felt the cold metal of the chain come in contact with my skin. I held my breath as he fastened the clasp at the nape of my neck, his fingers in that sensitive place sending a shock through my whole body.

He then reached around, adjusting where the stone fell at the top of my breasts, letting his hand linger there, burning his touch into my skin. The stone was a shimmering pale blue stone.

“A rare sapphire, as blue and clear as your eyes. Perfect, just like you,” he declared in a voice full of foreboding.

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CHAPTER 25

JULIANA

The necklace was beautiful, but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

Instead, I just looked back at Marco’s eyes through the reflection of the mirror, noting their intense and determined gaze. When I didn’t say any more, Marco took my hand and led me down the stairs.

The narrow skirt of my dress constrained my legs, making it difficult to walk and impossible to escape—maybe that was why he had chosen it. Marco and I traveled together in his car. He was obviously not going to let me out of his sight.

Today we would be getting married at a hotel in Chicago owned by the Fratellanza. Marco told me its location and setup would provide for better security than a church. To be honest, I didn’t care whether this wedding was

in a hotel or a church. Neither would seem real to me. Although it might seem real when Marco claimed his marital rights again tonight.

When the car pulled up at the hotel, I could see that Marco's soldiers were everywhere, looking serious and alert. Although I could see no weapons, I knew that every man's suit jacket concealed a gun and knife holster. Who was I kidding? Even the groom would have a gun or two tucked under his wedding tuxedo.

The drive had been my first trip out of the Marchiano estate since my kidnap. I had been desperate to get off the estate, but now I would do anything to be back there in the safety of Marco's bedroom.

We had passed through the center of the city, but I was too distracted to take in the view, nor did it seem like Marco was in the mood to be my tour guide and point out the sights.

Before getting out of the car, Marco faced me and leaned across, caging me in with his arms on either side of my lap. He bent his head toward me, and his lips brushed my ear. "You will behave today. Or there'll be consequences. Understand?"

I didn't reply, I couldn't. I dropped my gaze, not being able to look into his intense gaze.

He pulled my chin up with rough fingers. "Answer me," he demanded in a foreboding tone.

I gave the smallest nod, not being able to force any words past my dry lips.

He got out of the car and came around to my door, opening it and holding out his hand to me.

When I did not make a move to leave the car, he narrowed his eyes. "Come, Juliana."

It was as if his voice startled me out of my daze. I automatically registered his authoritative tone, my brain submitting to his words and my body moving. He put his hand under my elbow and helped me as I exited the car. I didn't push him away—I wasn't capable of even that right now.

Some guests were milling around the entrance of the hotel, waiting to catch a glimpse of us. Alessio approached Marco and they discussed a few security details between themselves as I was ushered inside. I noticed admiring glances coming from some of the guests, but nothing could make me feel special today. It felt as though I was walking to my execution.

I felt Marco put his hand at the small of my back, making a shudder run through my body. He led me forward into the foyer to meet some of his Underbosses and their wives. The wives cooed at my dress and said how gorgeous it was while their husbands discussed business with Marco. Everything was about business in our world—business and power.

I looked around me. The hotel was imposing and impressive, with a grand staircase and marble floors in the hotel lobby, together with plush white couches and pale armchairs interspersed with sophisticated floral arrangements. A hotel as stunning as this would be in great demand as a wedding venue, especially on a weekend in the summer months, and it would be booked up months if not years in advance.

I wondered what had happened to the other bride and groom who had booked their wedding ceremony to take place in this hotel today. It was impossible that the hotel had been free for our wedding at such short notice, but it was clear that we were the only wedding party here today.

I shuddered, hoping that Marco had offered the other wedding party a generous financial incentive to go elsewhere rather than just killing them off.

I let my mind wander as the conversations carried on around me. I couldn't help thinking about Jessica and wondering if she was okay and wishing that she could be here today like she should have been. She should have been at my side on my wedding day. But maybe it was better that she was nowhere near these violent monsters.

A few minutes later, the guests were being ushered into the hall where the ceremony would take place. I watched them as they moved away from us.

I felt a tight squeeze on my hand and realized that Marco was looking at me.

"Marco?" I wasn't sure what I was asking him.

"Here's Danio now. I'll be waiting for you inside. Don't disappoint me." After a long look at me, he placed my hand in Danio's and made his way into the ceremony hall for the start of the service.

There was no one from my family to give me away, so Danio was standing in to escort me down the aisle of the ceremony room. Out of all the Marchiano brothers, Danio seemed the nicest. Or maybe it was because he was still young and hadn't yet become as hardened and callous as his older brothers.

The strapless dress and lack of a veil made me feel exposed and vulnerable. And being given away by a practical stranger brought home to me how alone I was now. The isolation swooped down on me, consuming my mind and thoughts.

I heard the music begin. It was some sort of wedding music, probably chosen by the hotel staff since I didn't think Marco would have been interested in those sorts of details.

The doors opened, revealing Marco at the other end of the grand ceremony hall, together with the officiant who would be performing the ceremony and Alessio and Camillo who were Marco's groomsmen.

When I didn't walk forward, I heard Danio say in a gentle voice, "Are you okay Juliana? I said it's time to go in." I couldn't say anything or move, and instead I just stared at him.

His voice sounded far away, and everything seemed to blur.

And then tears fell from my eyes.

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CHAPTER 26

JULIANA

I’m not sure what happened next.

I remember feeling frozen by the stares of all the guests on me, but even more by the dark eyes of my groom who was watching me carefully.

His face was carefully blank, but I could see the darkness in his eyes, the darkness looking like it was ready to pounce on me like a panther ambushing its prey.

When I didn’t move, Marco came marching down the ceremony hall toward me.

The sound of his shoes echoed ominously against the tiled floor, getting louder as he neared me. He grabbed my hand and roughly led me away, back to the lobby where we had been standing previously.

“Sit,” he commanded, nodding to a plush armchair. “You’re shaking.”

I gratefully sank down into the chair, realizing that my legs and arms did feel shaky.

Marco turned to me. “I know you didn’t eat breakfast this morning. Have you drunk any water today, apart from when I gave you the Tylenol?”

“I had a couple of espressos instead.”

“How many cups of espresso?”

“Um, four.” What was this, the Spanish inquisition?

He looked at me carefully. “Single or doubles?”

“What?” I tried to avoid the question.

“Answer me.”

“Three doubles and one single. Satisfied?”

“For fuck’s sake, Juliana. No wonder you’re so jittery. You’re in such a state you may as well have knocked back a few shots of tequila.”

“I’m not old enough to drink, remember? I’m only old enough to be kidnapped and forced to marry,” I snapped back, fed up with his lecturing tone. I was expected to be an adult and honor the contract, but I was treated like a child and kept locked in a room.

I heard Marco order someone to bring a glass of water, and a minute later, one appeared in front of me. “Drink,” he ordered me.

I just looked at the water with disinterest. I wasn’t really thirsty; in all honesty, my nerves were making me feel nauseous.

“Juliana, for the love of God, drink the fucking water.”

I looked again at the water in my hand and decided that it might help me feel better, so I took a cautious sip and then slowly drank most of the rest of it.

“You’re feeling shaky and jittery after all that caffeine you’ve knocked back on an empty stomach.”

“Are you kidding me? Maybe I’m feeling jittery because I’m being forced to marry a brutal killer.”

He clenched his jaw and didn’t answer me. Seeing that I was done, he took the glass from my hands, brushing his fingertips against mine, and then set the glass down on a side table.

He crouched down in front of me, so that he was at eye level with me. “You know that you already agreed to all this when you signed the contract and that this is just a formalization of the agreement?”

“Yes, I know,” I whispered.

“So, what’s the problem?”

I didn’t reply. There was nothing to say.

He sighed. “This wedding was always going to take place eventually. One way or another. It doesn’t matter whether it’s taking place this week or last week. The outcome is the same. You belong to me now.”

I reluctantly met his eyes. “I know. It’s just this isn’t how I imagined it would be.”

“Don’t tell me that you imagined a fairytale wedding?” he mocked me.

“No, of course not,” I whispered.

“In our world, we don’t get a choice in who we marry. We marry for alliances, to strengthen the ties of our families. What does it matter whether you marry me, or it was someone else that you were promised to? In either case, you would have had no choice. It was always going to be a business deal.”

“But I didn’t think I would have to marry someone who nearly killed my sister and tortured my brother!” I still couldn’t get over what had happened to my sister and my brother, all because of some stupid alliance the Fratellanza and Società had planned. I still hadn’t been able to talk to my

family and those worries kept playing on my mind, kept niggling away in the background, unsettling me and wreaking havoc with my emotions. How many more people I loved would get hurt because of this man?

He stood back up, his stance tense and rigid. “Your brother knew the consequences of entering our territory uninvited. And it’s your own family that nearly killed Jessica. It was their bullet that shot her. I’m protecting you from your family.” His voice was a rough growl. “They had no regard for your safety. When will you understand that? You are merely a pawn in their twisted plans.”

“What does it matter? You’re all the same,” I spat back at him.

“We’ve been through all this already. This is the end of the conversation,” he said, his tone harsh with its finality. He held out his hand. “You had no choice then, and you have no choice now.”

And I looked at him for a long moment, before reluctantly putting my hand in his and letting him lead me back to the ceremony.

JULIANA

Marco handed me back to Danio and made his way to the front of the hall. Everyone was waiting for us, but the guests knew better than to stare at their Capo and his reluctant bride.

Instead, they contrived to talk among themselves, pretending they hadn’t noticed that the bride was not ecstatic to be marrying into the Fratellanza. Most of the men were trying not to show their boredom, while their wives looked at me with either sympathy or curiosity.

Several of the guests looked at me with barely concealed hatred, no doubt holding me accountable for the sins of the Società and the deaths of the Fratellanza soldiers on my first wedding day.

The music started up again, and this time Danio and I walked together down the aisle. I was on autopilot and just kept walking until we reached Marco.

I noticed that the room was exquisitely decorated with masses of fresh flowers. But somehow, I found their scent overwhelming, and the feeling of nausea came creeping back when I heard Marco make his vows in a strong, hard voice.

When it was my turn, I repeated after the officiant. “I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Juliana Bonardi, may not be joined in matrimony to Marco Marchiano.”

Well, I suppose being kidnapped and forced into marriage did not constitute a lawful impediment in the Mafia world.

The officiant then asked me to complete my vows. “I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, Juliana Bonardi, do take Marco Marchiano to be my lawfully wedded husband.”

Marco slipped the wedding ring onto the fourth finger of my left hand to join the diamond engagement ring that was already there. The band was yet another sign of his ownership of me.

The ceremony was over before I knew it, and somehow it did not feel real.

However, at the conclusion of the wedding ceremony, I knew that I was now the wife of Marco Marchiano. Not only under the contract drawn up under Mafia laws, but now also under the laws of the United States of America.

MARCO

Today we finally managed to make our vows and exchange rings without any interruption.

Juliana had made her vows in a quiet voice. I knew she didn’t want to marry me today, but her wants were irrelevant. Inside, I was raging at her earlier refusal to walk down the aisle. Her blatant rejection of me was like a match to the inferno that had been raging within me since the Società’s attack on our estate.

Her actions shouldn't have bothered me as much as they did, but for some reason my feelings toward this woman bordered on the obsessive.

What I'd made her witness in the garage block had been for her own good — so that she would never try to escape again and so that she wouldn't ever think again about returning to a family who didn't value her safety or her life. Because I couldn't let anyone ever harm her. She was too important to me to let that happen.

But her continued defiance today made my lungs tighten and the beast inside me rage.

Once she stopped fighting me and accepted her life with me, things would improve between us. Nothing could make me regret my initial actions of taking her against her will. There was no way that I would have ever left her behind. I would not allow anyone or anything to take this woman away from me.

Although she was strong and stubborn, she was vulnerable too. And while she might at times show indifference or anger toward me, I knew that

she was developing feelings for me. I had felt her pussy quiver in ecstasy around my cock, and I had seen the way she looked at me sometimes. Things had got off to a bad start, but she was always going to be mine one way or another. And now she was.

My need for her was intense. It went beyond a physical need or raw lust. And although at times I wanted to punish her while I fucked her, I had so far kept that dark side in its box.

The reality of our situation was crueler than I'd intended, but this was the way of our world. And I would never be sorry for taking her, nor for keeping her.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the officiant pronounced us to be husband and wife and declared that I could kiss my bride.

Juliana showed surprise on her face and her eyes quickly flicked away from me. She'd obviously forgotten about this part of the ceremony, but I hadn't.

The side of my mouth lifted in a smile, and I pulled her toward me, giving her no choice in the matter.

Her mouth remained resolutely closed during the kiss. No matter, there would be plenty of time later for me to rectify that.

And I was looking forward to making her submit to me tonight.

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CHAPTER 27

JULIANA

A small reception followed at the hotel.

In the banquet hall, I knocked back my glass of champagne and it tasted good. I swiftly picked up a second glass.

When it was time for the first dance, I let Marco lead me onto the dance floor and did not resist when he took me into his arms and held me against his chest. I yielded and rested my head against his hard, muscled torso. At least that way, I didn't have to look into his eyes and see his smirk as he crowed over his ownership of me.

I was relieved when it was time to go home. It was still early, however, being only mid-afternoon, giving me some respite before I would be expected to perform my wifely duties tonight.

As soon as we reached the mansion, I swiftly headed upstairs, eager to shed myself of this dress. As soon as I was in the bedroom, I tugged off the dress and left it in a heap on the floor. I grabbed a robe and wrapped it around me. Then I scooped up my pooch and held him to me and stroked his fur, more to soothe me than him.

Despite all my earlier coffee, all the champagne must have made me sleepy because the next thing I knew I was waking up. I could tell by the light filtering through the windows that it must be early evening now.

A short time later, Marco came upstairs to collect me for dinner. I told him that I wasn't hungry and that I wouldn't be coming down. He didn't look pleased about this, but he didn't push me. Perhaps he realized just how hard today had been for me.

He asked if I wanted to take Mr. Fluffy for a walk around the gardens. However, despite my earlier nap, I was exhausted and asked if Danio or Debi could take over the walk this evening.

Marco merely nodded and took my dog downstairs with him. Mr. Fluffy gave me a forlorn look and whined, probably wondering why I wasn't coming and why he was being taken out by the monster.

That night when Marco came up to bed, I tried to ignore him. I lay in bed facing away from him as he undressed.

"I know you're not sleeping."

I still didn't pay him any attention.

"At least you should be well rested after your nap this afternoon."

I stayed with my back to him and felt the mattress dip as he climbed into bed. He slid over to my side of the bed and ran his fingers gently up my bare arm and I felt a shiver run through me.

MARCO

I lightly ran my hand up her bare arm.

She was wearing panties and a strappy vest top, hardly wedding night attire, but she still looked as sexy as hell.

Moving my hand slowly down from her shoulder to her wrist, I then ran my hand back up her hip and side, caressing that sensitive spot for her. I inched my fingers under her top, connecting my fingers with her bare skin and hearing her sigh.

She might be trying to ignore me, but I knew that her body wasn't immune to me. I ran my palm across her smooth belly and up toward her delicious breasts. As I reached my target her breaths became deeper. I cupped her breasts and she pushed herself out into my palms, seeking their touch.

With my rough, calloused fingers, I caressed her nipples and lightly twisted them, hearing her gasp as I did so. She loved it when I played with her tits. I continued to fondle them, making them harder as they tightened into hard peaks of arousal in response to my teasing fingers.

I rolled each one between my thumbs and forefingers, both at the same time, distending them even more. I reached my hand down her belly to reach that tantalizing place, finding it drenched with her arousal. She wanted this as much as I did.

I turned her around in my arms and sank my lips toward her neck, kissing that delicate spot at the base of her throat. As she arched her head back, pushing herself toward my lips. I ran my mouth down her neck, nipping and

licking to the space between her breasts before latching onto her dark nipple with my eager lips.

While sucking that hard nub, one hand played with the other nipple and my second hand snaked down to the silky dark strip between her legs.

I softly fingered her labia and clit, resisting her attempts to push into my hand and increase the pressure. I wasn't going to let her off that easily, not when I wanted to hear her pleading and crying my name.

I continued sucking her nipple and pulling at the other nipple, feeling her get wetter and wetter. She was pressed up to me and was so close to coming, but I wasn't allowing that yet.

I pulled back, hearing her mewl in protest. I ran my hands back up her body, grasping her head between my hands and kissing her lips.

I felt her frustration as she squirmed against me and eagerly grabbed my hardness. She would be too sore after last night and I wouldn't hurt her by penetrating her tonight.

I could see impatience in her startling blue eyes, which she dropped down to look at my erection while licking her lips with her delicate pink tongue. Fuck. This girl was killing me.

She surprised me by moving down my body and tentatively licking the tip of my cock with her soft tongue. She obviously had never done this with a man before and was uncertain as to what she should do, but I could see the curiosity in her eyes.

She opened her mouth wider and licked my erection all the way from the base to the tip, frowning slightly when she tasted the drop of salty pre-cum.

"Take me into your mouth," I instructed. She did so obediently. "Good girl," I said in a gruff voice.

She struggled to fit my girth into her small mouth, so I wrapped her palm around the base so that she would be stroking my whole length with both her hand and mouth. I wrapped my large hand tightly around her smaller one, showing her how hard I liked my dick to be held, and then moved my hand with hers to show her how to pump my cock.

And at the same time, she instinctively moved her head back and forward, moving my length in and out of her mouth.

“Suck harder,” I ordered, and she obeyed my command. It felt like sheer heaven. I thought it couldn’t get any better until she swirled her tongue around the head, almost making me come there and then.

I pulled back and looked deep into her eyes and I could see the arousal in her expression just from having me in her mouth.

Then I pushed her back onto the mattress. She gasped in surprise as I roughly forced her thighs apart and pushed my tongue deep into her slit. I lapped at her juices and tasted her arousal, making me want her even more.

She squirmed under my tongue, grabbing at my hair while moans of pleasure escaped her lips. Her moans were the sexiest thing I had ever heard, and they ignited a primal urge within me to make her mine in every way possible.

When she approached her climax, I backed off, ignoring her whimpers. “Please, Marco. I need to come. Please.”

But instead, I licked and nipped at the tender skin of her inner thighs before running my tongue along the sensitive skin at the back of her knees. I flipped her over again so she was on her stomach, and I straddled her ass. I buried my nose in her inky tresses, inhaling her erotic scent.

I moved my lips over her sensitive shoulders and ran my tongue down her back toward the perfect globes of her ass. She tensed as she was not

sure what I was planning.

“Get up on all fours. Spread your legs wide open for me. Show me what’s mine. Show me what I own.”

She obeyed and submitted to my orders, making my cock grow even harder. I parted her folds and then slid my tongue from her ass all the way down to her clit, before capturing her labia between my lips and gently tugging on them. Then I feasted on her clit relentlessly until she was panting and was pushed over the edge and screamed in the throes of her orgasm.

But I didn’t let go then and instead carried on sucking at her oversensitive erect nub, despite her trying to push my mouth away. Soon however her arousal was building again into that intense peak until she succumbed to a second shattering climax.

As she lay panting against the sheets, I knelt beside her and looked at her limbs glistening with sweat and her thighs streaked with her pussy juices and cum.

I smelled her unique fragrance which was mingled with the scent of her arousal. Kneeling above her, I fisted my cock and pumped it while I could still taste her on my tongue until I could hold back no longer.

My balls contracted and my cock expanded, shooting its load to where I aimed it over her tits. I continued milking my cock with my tight fist, grunting with each spurt, until I had wrung out every last drop of my cum over her perfect body,

For a few moments I just looked at how I had marked my property in the most primal of ways while she looked at me with her softly parted lips and flushed cheeks. Then I massaged my thick white cum into her breasts and nipples so that she would know that she was mine.

Then I took her lips with mine. “You’re incredible. And now you’re mine, forever.”

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CHAPTER 28

MARCO

The next few weeks were the hardest for Juliana.

Slowly she started to accept her new life with me. She now had all her meals with the family and was free to walk around the grounds whenever she wanted, although someone always accompanied her if she wanted to leave the estate.

My anger toward her had abated after she had submitted to me on our wedding night. It was as if she understood now that she was mine, and that pleased me immensely. She could no longer deny her attraction to me; I knew, however, that she missed her family.

All along, I'd told myself that my actions and feelings toward her were because I owned her via the contract and didn't want someone taking what

was mine. But I'd finally admitted to myself that what I felt for her wasn't ownership— it was an intense need to care for her and to protect her.

While Juliana was still wary around Alessio and Camillo, I could see her opening up more around Danio and, particularly, Debi. It was good for Debi to have an older female around. Debi had been five when our mom died, so she had been raised mostly by Alessio and me.

I overheard Juliana and Debi talking one day in the kitchen while they were baking a cake. “I really like him, but he just doesn’t notice me. It’s as if I’m invisible to him and I don’t know how to change it,” complained Debi to Juliana.

“Debi, it’s not that he doesn’t notice you. You’re gorgeous and sweet and funny. But he knows who your brothers are, and he knows that one day your family will decide who you will marry.”

“But I don’t see why I can’t date other boys, even if eventually I have to have an arranged marriage. It would just be nice, you know, to hold hands and stuff.”

Alessio came into the kitchen at that point. “Shortcake, he won’t want to just hold your hand—trust me.”

Debi gave an exaggerated sigh. I knew that most people wouldn’t get away with that sort of attitude with Alessio, but with his younger siblings he was just a big softy.

“And if he tries to hold your hand, let’s just say that he won’t have use of his fingers or hands for much longer,” said Alessio, narrowing his eyes.

Debi huffed, but Juliana changed the subject and suggested they go clothes shopping tomorrow as there was a sale going on at one of Debi’s favorite stores. That seemed to cheer her up.

I was glad that Debi had another girl to talk to now and I was grateful that Juliana was making an effort with my siblings.

JULIANA

Now I was Marco’s wife, things became somewhat clearer.

He'd been right when he'd said that I’d already been promised to him and was bound to marry him. I had to try and accept it. I wouldn’t risk any more people being hurt trying to save me.…especially not when a part of me yearned to be here with him.

I couldn't understand these thoughts my mind was having, and I didn't understand my attraction to this man.

But while a part of me wanted to be here with him, I still couldn't get over what he'd done to Jess and Jacob. My mind was in turmoil—how could I hate a man but desire him at the same time?

One day, when I went downstairs for lunch, I found Debi talking to a girl I hadn’t seen before.

The girl looked to be around my age, or possibly a few years older, and she had beautiful white-blonde hair cut into a stylish bob that skimmed the top of her shoulders. She was wearing a denim skirt plus a yellow sweater decorated with pale blue pawprints.

“Hey,” the blonde girl said to me.

“Juliana, this is Anni. She’s married to Marco’s cousin, Lorenzo, and they live nearby.”

“Hi Anni,” I said cautiously.

“So, you’re the girl who’s snared the Capo,” she grinned.

I gave her a small smile back. “Well, technically, he snared me.”

A laugh escaped her lips. “Yeah, these Marchiano guys are hard to argue with when they get an idea into their head.”

“You were forced into a marriage too?”

“It was an arranged marriage, but that’s basically the same thing in our world, isn’t it?” She flicked a stray strand of blonde hair off her face. “I was a Veneti before my marriage. Lorenzo and I started off on the wrong foot when we met, so a marriage was arranged to stop the Venetis and Marchianos falling out and murdering each other.”

I liked this girl. She said what she thought and didn’t look like she’d let any guy browbeat her. “Why don’t you stay and have lunch with Debi and me?”

Anni readily agreed and we ate lunch around the kitchen island and got to know each other.

“What does Lorenzo do in the Fratellanza?” I asked, taking a bite of my sandwich.

“He’s the Underboss for Chicago, so he works pretty closely with Marco and Alessio. Us living so close by is really convenient for his work.”

“And how are you finding married life?” I was eager to know if she had found happiness with a Marchiano; if she had, then maybe there could be some hope for me.

“Married life? I’d say it’s pretty busy and full-on, but in a good way.”

“Lorenzo and Anni have two children—Clara and Clemente,” chipped in Debi. “They’re four and two, and they’re just adorable.”

“You have two kids—already?” I was shocked by this. She looked quite young to already have two children.

Anni chuckled. “Lorenzo was married before and had two children, but his wife died. So, I’m not their birth mom, but I love them as if they were my own.”

“Wow, Anni, I thought an arranged marriage was difficult, but having to take on two kids as well must have been a huge adjustment for you.”

“We made it work, although there were a few teething issues to start with,” she said seriously. “You’ll probably find that with Marco too. I know the Marchianos have a reputation for their cruelness and brutality, but under it all they’re decent guys.”

“How are the children doing?” Debi asked.

“They’re great. Lorenzo’s just the most amazing dad. Clara is a real daddy’s girl. She idolizes Lorenzo. He works a lot more from home now, and she loves to be with him whenever she can. Obviously not when he’s talking about business, but if he’s just on his laptop, she’ll be in his study with him so that she can be near him. The other day I went into the study and Lorenzo was supposed to be working, but I found Clara curled up in his lap and he was reading a story to her.”

“My dad would never have taken time out of his working day to spend with my siblings or me,” I commented.

Debi nodded in agreement.

I looked down at Anni’s clothes. “Do I take it by your sweater that you like animals?”

“Definitely. A house isn’t a home unless you have at least one pet. Although Lorenzo isn’t always on the same page as me when it comes to having pets.”

A small frown furrowed my brow. “I don’t know what it is about these Marchiano men, but they really don’t like animals, do they?”

“Maybe it’s part of the Fratellanza initiation process that they swear to hate animals,” giggled Anni. “There’s an animal shelter near here; we should get the guys to come there and then hold them at gunpoint until they give in and bond with the animals.”

“Maybe after being forced to spend some time with some cute fluffy animals, they’ll fall in love with them just like we always do,” suggested Debi.

“And pigs might fly,” I giggled, feeling a lightness that I hadn’t felt in a while.

After Anni had told me some more about herself and Lorenzo, as well as filling me in on some of the issues at the start of their marriage and Lorenzo’s aversion to pets, I asked her about her family. “The Venetis are from Staten Island, right?”

“That’s right. Have you ever been?”

“No. I would love to go there and see the sights in New York. But you know how it is.”

“Yeah, you’re not safe in a place if your family doesn’t run the city,” said Debi with a sigh. “I mean, I love Chicago, but it would be nice to spread my wings a bit. I didn’t even get to see much of L.A. when we were there for Juliana’s wedding as that got cut short…”

“Well, as the Venetis and Marchianos have their alliance now, sealed by me being thrown under the bus and being arranged in marriage to Lorenzo, you guys would be safe if you visited my hometown.” Anni’s green eyes lit up as an idea came to her. “Hey, we should do a girls’ road trip to Staten Island—it would be so much fun. Especially since Lorenzo always has an excuse as to why he hasn’t got time to come and see my family with me.”

“He doesn’t like your family?” I asked.

“He says they’re batshit crazy.” Anni’s tone was very matter-of-a-fact.

My jaw dropped a little. “And you don’t mind him talking about your family like that?”

Anni shrugged. “I don’t let the small shit bother me.”

“A girls’ trip would be so cool,” enthused Debi. She turned her head toward me. “Do you think Marco would agree?”

“Marco would definitely not agree, nor would Lorenzo,” we heard a voice say behind us. I whipped my head around to see Marco walking into the kitchen.

“Aw, come on, Marco,” wheedled Anni. “I was just telling Juliana that you aren’t that bad, so why don’t you prove my point by letting her and Debi go with me on one of my trips home?”

“Nice try, Oakley. But the answer’s still no.”

“Oakley?” I asked in confusion.

“That’s Anni’s nickname,” explained Debi.

Marco looked at me. “Trust me, Juliana, you don’t want to meet the Venetis.”

“They can’t be that bad,” I argued.

“Yes, they can,” he replied with a scowl. “They’re complete loons.”

My eyes widened at his choice of words. Anni, however, wasn’t perturbed by what he’d said. It was like water off a duck’s back, and I had to admire her for her relaxed attitude.

Marco grabbed a coffee and then headed for the office, leaving us to our lunch.

As we finished eating, Mr. Fluffy came into the kitchen. He’d just woken from his nap and started snuffling around for food. He’d finished the pack

of dog biscuits yesterday, so I excused myself and headed to the storeroom to collect a new pack.

On my way back to the kitchen, a man I hadn't met was standing in the hallway, typing something on his phone.

He looked up, his calculating gaze assessing me. After a long moment, he spoke. "You must be Juliana—the girl who's caused all the trouble."

"And you must be the cat-hater," I responded. Anni had shown me a photo on her phone of this man: he was her husband, Lorenzo.

His eyes flickered for the briefest moment at my comment. I knew he wouldn't normally give anything away, but his guard was down while he was inside his cousin's home. "I see my reputation proceeds me," he drawled. "I also hate anyone from the Società."

"Well, I'm no longer Società. Marco saw to that when he forced me to become his wife."

He continued staring at me. He was really intense, and I couldn't help thinking that he was also a little scary.

I turned around and headed back to the kitchen, but I could sense him following me.

When we entered the kitchen, he spoke to Anni. "I've finished what I needed to discuss with Alessio. Do you want a lift back to the house?" His voice was much softer with his wife, and I could sense the affection between them. It made me wonder if my marriage would ever be like that?

"Thanks, Lorenzo, that would be great. I need to collect my car and pick up the kids from your mother's house soon."

We said our goodbyes, and Anni promised to arrange another meet-up. I was glad to have made another friend here, and I could see us becoming close.

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As the weeks went on, our days settled into a sort of routine, and I was spending more time with the family and getting to know them better.

However, the one person who I was still wary of was Alessio. He hadn't ever really accepted me, and he definitely hadn't accepted Mr. Fluffy.

One evening, Marco was accompanying me on my evening walk with Mr. F. Even I had started sometimes calling my pooch 'Mr. F' as a nickname. While we walked, I decided to ask Marco about Alessio. "Why is Alessio afraid of dogs?"

"It's not a case of being afraid. He just doesn't like dogs."

"He's a big bad Mafia man and he can't handle one small dog?"

Marco sighed. "It's not like that."

"What is it like then? Danio and Debi say they have always wanted their own dog, but Alessio's aversion has meant that they never got one."

"It just doesn't work with our lifestyle. Look, not everyone's a fan of dogs like you.

"Not everyone's a fan of Made Men, but here I am stuck with you," I shot back.

"Yep, you are stuck with me. Now can we move on and talk about something other than your dog?"

JULIANA

The next afternoon I was sitting on a sun lounger in the garden, reading a book and enjoying the sunshine. I was finding it hard to concentrate on my book and my mind kept wandering.

Marco seemed different lately, more human somehow and less of a monster.

I felt different when I was with him. His gray eyes seemed less cold and cruel when they were on me, and a thrill would rush through me when he ran a thumb over my hip or put his hand against the small of my back.

I found it hard to keep away from him, although I tried telling myself it was just my body's physical reaction to his skilled touch.

But, sometimes, I knew it was more than that. I wanted to be with him, talk to him and hear his thoughts. He was like me in some ways—he cared intensely about his siblings, and they meant the world to him. Being part of this world, the Mafia world, didn't mean that a man couldn't have a heart. And when it came to his sister and brothers, I knew he was a man whose heart was capable of great love.

Maybe I didn't hate him anymore? Or was it more than that?

I wondered if maybe the separation from my family was getting to me more than I realized.

Here I was, having all these thoughts—yet he was still the same man, and I was still his prisoner. He guarded every moment of my life, and I didn't really have any free choice.

However, whenever I was with him, I was distracted by the color of his eyes, the curve of his mouth and the strength of his muscles. My mind kept flitting from being ashamed of my desire for my captor to feeling a deep need to have his body against mine.

But whatever was happening between us emotionally, I still couldn’t accept his refusal to allow me contact with my family. And I knew it was something that was an insurmountable obstacle between us. Even if I had fallen for my captor, I would never give up my siblings and my family.

MARCO

As the weeks went on, I could see that the wedding had been the right decision. Although Juliana still had some anger toward me, she also knew she had no choice now, and that made things easier for her. Where there was no choice, there was less point in resistance. And when she wasn't resisting the situation, she gave in more willingly to her obvious attraction to me.

We still had some days where Juliana actively tried to avoid me. But she couldn’t get away from me at night, nor did she want to.

It only took one touch, one lingering look or one whisper for her to willingly come to me.

One night after we had both orgasmed, she was lying in my arms afterward, her cheeks flushed a delicate shade of peach. I looked down at her arm, where the gash from the church had healed but left behind a small, jagged scar. It looked wrong on her perfect skin, a sin marring her innocence, and it bothered me.

The Società was responsible for that, and I was responsible for not protecting her from them. She had been mine to not only own but also to protect.

I no longer felt just possessive of her, I also felt protective of her. When I thought about her during the day, I felt not only desire in my loins but also a

fierce protectiveness in my chest.

Juliana seemed to be weighing up in her mind whether to say something or not. “I’m not a mind reader. If something’s on your mind, just say it.”

She licked her lips in a nervous gesture. “My birthday is next week.”

“I know. Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten that you’ll be turning twenty.”

“I’ve been thinking about a present that I would like.”

She said nothing further. “Go on.”

Biting her lower lip, she paused, but then her words rushed out. “I want to call Jessica.”

We looked at each other and neither of us said anything. I could see she was uneasy. When I made no response, she rushed on. “I could call her on her cell phone and make sure to tell her that she can’t mention the call to my family or anyone else. I’m sure that she would agree to that, if it meant that we could speak to each other. Please.”

Having got that off her chest, she exhaled a breath and lay back against her pillow, waiting for an answer. I could see the tension in her shoulders as she waited.

I regarded her closely. She had come a long way these past few weeks. She was no longer fighting me at every turn and that was refreshing, given our rocky start. “In some ways it’s better that you do not have contact with anyone from your old life.”

“But we’re not just talking about anyone. We’re talking about my sister.”

“All the more reason why it will be upsetting for you. It will bring back all the memories that I’m trying to move you on from, like your sister getting shot.”

“But I’ve been trying. I’ve really been trying. I’m not dwelling on the kidnap or you forcibly keeping me here or that you made me go through

with the marriage.” She was getting worked up.

My jaw tightened. “The way you describe it makes me think that you are still dwelling on it. You still resent the Fratellanza. You still resent me.”

“I’ll resent you more for not letting me speak to my family!”

“You have my answer. It’s no. No good will come from speaking to your sister. You need to move on and put that all behind you. I know you don't believe me but I'm protecting you from any further harm coming to you. Your father's plan on our original wedding day could have ended up with you being dead. You're too important to me to let anything like that ever happen again. You're mine now, and I protect what's mine.”

“How can I move on? I’ve never been allowed to have any closure. I wasn’t even given the chance to say goodbye to my family. I’m your wife now and we are legally married. I can’t go back to them, so why can’t you just let me have this one small thing?”

“We’re not talking about this anymore.” And then I turned toward the nightstand to switch off the lamp.

When I tried to pull her into my arms, she struggled and went as far as to elbow me in the abdomen.

I caught her by her hair and pulled her head back. “Careful, beautiful. Don’t push me on this,” I warned.

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CHAPTER 29

MARCO

In the days leading up to her birthday, I had to admire Juliana for trying to not dwell on my refusal to let her phone her sister. She didn't sulk as I feared she would.

It was a couple of days before her birthday. In the evening, I was cooking dinner in the kitchen while Juliana watched me. I was making a Thai chicken and basil stir-fry with jasmine rice.

Juliana had admitted to me that she had no idea how to cook and that her mother had a housekeeper who had prepared all their meals. "Where did you learn to cook? Did your mom teach you?" she asked while watching me chop up vegetables to add to the chicken which I was stir-frying.

We hadn't really talked about my parents. Whenever Juliana had previously asked about them, I'd changed the subject, making it clear to her

that I did not want to talk about them. “When our parents died, we moved to this house. With our parents gone, me and Alessio were in charge. Camillo was nine, Danio was six, and Debi was only five. Man, Debi was such a cute kid. Still is.”

“So, you started cooking when you all moved in here together?”

“Yeah, it meant that either Alessio or I would have to be here for mealtimes. We wanted the kids to have that, you know, a bit like a normal upbringing. If we had gotten live-in staff, it would have been too easy to skip meals with the kids and just leave the staff to deal with them.”

Alessio and Camillo came into the kitchen to check when dinner was going to be ready. The smell of food always attracted the guys. Camillo joined in our conversation. “Marco and Alessio were like the mom and pop of the family. Although I still remember how bad their first attempts at cooking were.”

Alessio frowned at that comment. “Hey, smart-ass, we got there in the end. Anyway, we keep telling you that you have to learn how to cook now, so then you can take over your fair share of the cooking duties,” Alessio reminded Camillo.

Camillo just grinned. “You know, Alessio, that Debi likes your cooking best and that I could never compete with you in that regard.” Alessio looked pleased at that comment. Camillo was smart, sucking up to Alessio’s soft spot: Debi. Debi was a soft spot for all her brothers.

Debi came by then and looked at her brothers earnestly. “I don’t mind learning to cook so that I can help out more?”

Alessio looked down affectionately at her. “No. You need to concentrate on school and homework right now. There’s plenty of time for learning to

cook later.” And with that, he gave her a kiss on the top of her head and then moved to set the table for dinner.

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On the morning of Juliana’s birthday, I woke her up by licking her clit and making her come as I feasted on her pussy, before thrusting into her quivering channel and making her orgasm again as I reached my own climax.

“Happy birthday, beautiful,” I said afterward as she lay sated in my arms, running her fingers over the tattoos on my arm. After cuddling for a while, I decided to get up. “Come on, let’s get showered and then I’ll make you a special breakfast before the kids head off to school.”

After getting dressed, we headed down the stairs. “What’s for breakfast?” asked Juliana.

“Your favorite.”

“Pancakes with strawberries, blueberries, and cream?”

“Absolutely. Today I’m going to spoil you.”

“Happy Birthday!” As we entered the kitchen, Debi rushed over to give Juliana a hug.

Danio gave Juliana a big smile. “Happy 20th Birthday, Juliana.”

“Oh wow, you did this for me?” Juliana looked genuinely surprised. Debi and Danio had decorated the kitchen with balloons and there were cards and gifts waiting for her.

“Yeah, we got up a little earlier than normal,” replied Danio.

“And that would have been really hard for Danio. You don’t even want to know how hard it is to get his ass out of bed in the mornings,” I chuckled.

Camillo and Alessio had already left as they had work to do, so the four of us settled down to breakfast. While we ate, Juliana opened birthday cards and gifts from my siblings. Even Camillo and Alessio had left a card for her.

Debi and Danio had gotten Juliana a pretty bracelet. “Oh, this is gorgeous. I love it, thank you.”

At the end there was one card left to be opened. When Juliana opened it, she giggled. “A card from Mr. Fluffy.” The card depicted a dog who looked remarkably similar to her dog. Juliana read the message and, knowing it was from Debi and Danio, she got up and gave them both a hug. “Thanks for all this, guys. It really means a lot to me.”

I checked my watch. “Okay, come on kids, you better get a move on, or you’ll be late for school.”

Once they had left, Juliana and I headed out into the estate’s woods with Mr. F for his morning run around. I should have been working, but I had taken to accompanying Juliana on her dog walks when I had time. This always seemed one of the times when she was at her most peaceful.

We sat down together at the fallen log next to Danio and Debi’s old treehouse. The treehouse still had its weather-beaten flag with the logo saying ‘Debi & Danio’ around a teddy bear face. I’d thought that helping Alessio to build the kids the playhouse would help my guilt about them losing their parents at such a young age—but I’d found that nothing could stop that guilt from crushing me, not then and not in the years that came after.

The dog was happily running around in circles, chasing his own tail. He never seemed to tire of doing that. We sat in silence for a while, watching the dog run around. Eventually he ran up to Juliana, waking her out of her deep thoughts. She bent down toward him and ruffled his fur, just as he liked. He was out of breath and panting and sat down at Juliana's feet for a break.

As he leaned against her legs, she absently rubbed his ears. I don't know whether it was to comfort the dog or to comfort herself. She seemed far away, and I saw a brief glimpse of emotion—of pain—cross her features.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She answered quickly. A little too quickly.

Damn. I knew that she was thinking about her family, but she didn't want to say anything to me about them.

After a pause, I held out my cell phone to her.

She just looked at my outstretched hand, and she completely froze. It was as though she thought that it might be a trick and that if she moved to take the phone, I would pull it away.

JULIANA

I reached for the cell phone with shaking fingers. I felt the cold metal against my palm. I just looked down at the phone for a few seconds.

"You can call your sister."

I went to enter Jessica's number; however, the phone needed a pin. "It's locked."

Marco reached across me and typed in his pin number. His fingers brushed against mine. It sent a shockwave through me; all my senses were heightened.

I entered Jess's phone number. I keyed it in automatically, not having to think about the number after having dialed it so many times in the past.

"Remember, she's to tell no one about the call. And keep it on speaker."

I nodded as I listened to the ringing tone. But the phone kept ringing and I felt a pit of disappointment in my stomach as I realized that she wasn't going to pick up.

As I went to hang up, Jess's voice came onto the line. "Hello?"

For a second, I couldn't say anything, feeling tears stinging the back of my eyes. "Jess?" I croaked out. "It's me. Please don't tell anyone I'm calling. Can you talk?"

"I can talk. Is that really you, Juliana? God, how are you?"

"I'm fine, but I've been so worried about you after you got shot. Are you okay? They told me that you were treated quickly at the church and then taken to hospital."

"It's nearly healed now but I've never felt so much pain in my life. They said I was lucky that it didn't hit any major blood vessels."

"Oh Jess, it's so good to hear your voice. I've really missed you."

"I can't believe the Fratellanza took you. Are you okay? Did they, did he…force you?"

I looked at Marco. "It wasn't like that. I'm okay. I'm trying to make the best of things. I want to hear about you and what you have been up to. How are Jake and Mother?" I said, trying to change the subject away from me.

"Father and Mother have been keeping me busy. I'm getting married in a few weeks' time."

“What?” I exclaimed. “What do you mean? To whom?”

“They’re marrying me to Rafael Santino. We’ll be married next month.” Rafael was Gabriel Santino’s younger brother.

“But it’s only been a few weeks since I was supposed to get married.”

“I’m eighteen now and therefore Father says I’m old enough to be married off. In the two months you’ve been gone, the Società has been in an uproar after your kidnapping. Emanuel Santino and Father thought a union between our families would send a signal of strength.”

“What’s Rafael like?” I had never really spoken to Rafael Santino.

Jess gave a hollow laugh. “Well, he’s a Santino. They’re all ruthless. I doubt he’ll show me any mercy.”

“He might be good to you, Jess. At least you will still be near Mother and Jake.” After a pause I said, “I wish I could be near you too. Jess, I miss you so much. You and Jake are always in my thoughts.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone and then I heard a sniffle from Jess. “Jess, don’t cry. I’m okay, really. And you will be too, I know it. I wish I could be there on your wedding day.”

“I wish that too.” Jess didn’t say anything else to me and there was silence. I could hear her crying down the phone, but it didn’t seem as though it was only about what had happened to me.

As the older of the two of us, I had always been able to reassure Jess. She was more sensitive than me and I had looked out for her. “Jess, is something else wrong?” When Jess didn’t reply I knew there was something else. “Jess?”

“You can’t help me. Nobody can. What’s done is done.”

“Jess, if you really don’t want to marry Rafael, perhaps there is a way out of it.”

I hear a humorless laugh from her. “As if Father or Emanuel Santino would let me off the hook. Anyway, the engagement contract has been signed, so it’s all settled and there’s no way out for me.”

Marco was signaling to me to wind up the call. I knew he had work to do, but I wished I could talk to Jessica for longer. “I’m sorry but I have to go now. I’ll try to call again soon, Jess. Take care of yourself.”

“Happy Birthday, Juliana.”

“I love you, Jess.”

“I love you too, Juliana.”

Then I heard the phone disconnect. I sat looking at the screen with tears rolling down my cheeks. After a few moments, I felt Marco wiping the tears away with his thumbs. “Hey, she sounded fine.”

“She didn’t sound happy.”

“I bet you didn’t sound happy after signing the contract to marry me.”

“Yes, but I know her. It seemed as though there was something else troubling her.”

“Don’t worry. She’s got all your family around to protect her.”

I shouldn’t have felt grateful to Marco for letting me call my sister, but I was grateful. He was a Made Man and his life was all about cruelty. Letting me talk to my sister was a show of kindness from him, a sign that he might really care about me.

I knew that lately I had been letting my guard down around him. When I thought about him, I no longer denied the attraction I felt toward him. He was good looking and had an impressive body; however, beyond his physical appearance, there was something else about him which was drawing me in.

His possessiveness toward me had frightened me previously. Now it exhilarated me, sending an electric shock through me when I thought about it.

I knew he would always be cruel and a killer and nothing would change that. Lately, though, he was different toward me, and I was starting to crave not only his touch but also his company.

MARCO

Later I cooked a special dinner to mark Juliana’s birthday. And Debi baked her a chocolate cake.

We all sang happy birthday to Juliana, and she paused while she made a wish before blowing out the candles. I wondered what she had wished for. She seemed in good spirits albeit a little unsettled, no doubt due to the call with her sister earlier. But letting her talk to Jessica had been the right thing to do.

Juliana was right when she said she had been trying to adjust to her new life in Chicago. I couldn’t keep her a prisoner forever. She was my wife now and I wanted her to be a proper part of this family.

Not that it meant that I’d be giving her a cell phone of her own any time soon. The Fratellanza and Società were enemies now and I had to be careful about any communication between the sisters.

That night in bed, I told Juliana that perhaps she might want to thank me for her birthday present. My cock reacted every time she was near, and emotionally we were getting closer too.

After we had both come, we lay in bed with her in my embrace. I always felt closer to Juliana after sex. All the other shit that had happened didn't come between us when she was in my arms like this.

I knew that for now at least, she was giving herself fully to me. And I imagined what it would be like if it could always be like this.

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CHAPTER 30

JULIANA

As I was falling asleep that night, Marco told me that he usually baked all the birthday cakes for the family, but that Debi had really wanted to bake the cake for me today.

“It was a great cake—she’s pretty good at baking,” I responded. “So, you can bake cakes too?”

“Yeah, after our mom died, I took over the job of making the birthday cakes. It had always been her job until our father killed her.”

Suddenly the sleepiness I had felt was banished from my mind. I quickly turned to Marco. “Your father killed her?” His face showed that he hadn’t meant to tell me that.

After a pause, he replied. “Yes. He shot her in the head.”

“But I thought...that…”

“That I’d killed my mom? I know that’s what the rumor mill said.”

“That’s what everyone said. That you killed both your parents and then took over power of the Fratellanza. But why did your father kill your mom? She had more than done her wifely duty by him even by Mafia standards—she’d produced five children for him, including four boys as potential heirs.”

“He killed her to make a point to Alessio and me.”

“What?” My scalp prickled. “Why would he do that?”

Marco was silent for a while. Then he started to speak. “I was eighteen years old and Alessio had just turned seventeen. We had been initiated into the Fratellanza a few years earlier. Our father thought we were still weak.” Marco paused then.

“I don’t understand.”

Marco sighed. “He sent Alessio to kill one of his soldiers who had been skimming money off the profits and keeping it for himself. I went along as well. Alessio roughed him up pretty bad and thought that would be enough to teach him a lesson and stop him from doing it again.”

“So, he didn’t kill the soldier and your father was mad?”

“Mad is an understatement. He was livid that Alessio had disobeyed him. He said Alessio was weak, and he decided to teach him a lesson to make him toughen up. Then he shot Alessio’s dog.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face. “Oh my God,” I whispered.

“The dog was called Comet. Alessio was as close to Comet as he is to me. Our father thought loving a dog, or any sort of pet, was a sign of weakness. He killed Comet in front of us.”

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

“I remember crying out when the bullet hit Comet. But Alessio wouldn’t give our father the satisfaction and he didn’t show any emotion. But killing Comet wasn’t enough for our father—he wanted Alessio to admit that he was too emotional and too attached.”

“I still don’t understand what this has to do with your mom?” I said in bewilderment. I didn’t understand what had happened to her, but my sixth sense told me that it was really bad.

Marco was silent again as if he were lost in his memories, before carrying on.

“Our mom had been scared of our father. As we became older and realized that, Alessio and I tried to look out for her and protect her. I was nine when Camillo was born; even at that young age I could sense the tension at home.”

I stayed quiet, just listening as he dug through his memories.

“Alessio and I used to help my mom with Camillo, feeding him and playing with him. She always seemed so tired and rundown. I was twelve when Danio was born and I had just been initiated, but I still tried to help my mom as much as I could, changing diapers and just doing whatever I could.”

Marco paused, then gave a small smile. “Then Debi was born a year later. My mom was thrilled to have a girl at last, one child that wouldn’t have to be initiated into the Fratellanza. Man, she was so cute. So was Danio—he had the greatest chuckle and was always laughing. Camillo was a holy terror—always up to mischief, and that’s never changed.”

I found it hard to imagine Marco changing diapers, but when he spoke about his siblings, I could clearly see the love in his eyes. “Our father couldn’t stand that we helped our mom with the babies. He said we were

mommy’s boys and we needed to toughen up. He didn’t see that we were being tough in standing up to him.”

“When he didn’t get a reaction out of Alessio after killing his dog, he got even more furious. He wanted to see that his punishment had an effect. He dragged our mother into the room and shot her in front of us, point blank in the front of her head. He thought that we were too attached to her as well. He said that any sort of love was not an option for a Marchiano and that we had to hold ourselves apart to be strong.”

I felt tears running down my cheeks. I couldn’t imagine what Alessio and Marco must have gone through that day.

“When he shot our mom, neither me nor Alessio could hold back. We beat him to a pulp until there wasn’t an ounce of life left in him.”

“I can’t believe…any father would do that.”

“He said that we had disobeyed him, our Capo, and that we had not done our duty to the Fratellanza. Obedience and duty are everything in our world. But he took it too far. He was deranged and unhinged, and we were glad to be rid of him. But becoming Capo meant nothing to me after what happened to my mom.”

“To do that to his wife, to the mother of his children. And to do it in front of his children, that’s utterly horrific.”

“It was my fault. I should have killed the traitor myself when Alessio didn’t finish the job properly. I was the oldest and I was the future Capo. It was my responsibility, and I didn’t do what I should have done—what might have stopped our mom from paying with her life. It’s my fault that Camillo, Danio and Debi had to grow up without their mom.”

“You were barely an adult. How can you say that any of it was your fault? You can’t blame yourself for your father’s sins, and your siblings

would never blame you either."

"That's why I have to protect them now. They are my responsibility. I would lay down my life for them."

Marco didn't say any more after that and said he wanted to sleep. I knew ours was a cruel world and nothing either of us said could change that. We lay in each other's arms, silent with our thoughts, until we eventually fell asleep.

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CHAPTER 31

JULIANA

A few days passed, and since I had been able to phone Jess on my birthday, there had been less tension between Marco and me.

Sometimes I even managed to forget that he'd forced me to come to Chicago against my will. I looked forward to spending time with him when he wasn’t working, and I willingly shared his bed. I didn’t know what had changed between us, but there had been a shift at some point.

I felt electrified whenever his gaze fell on me. Even when he entered a room, I would feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up before I even saw or heard him.

He was having such a profound effect on me, but I couldn’t understand why this was happening between us.

I was in the kitchen when Marco walked in. “Mr. Fluffy seems more settled now. He hasn’t peed on the floor today,” I commented to him.

Marco eyeballed my pet. “The day is yet young,” he muttered darkly. He obviously wasn’t convinced that Mr. Fluffy was house-trained.

And as if to prove him right, that afternoon I found one of Mr. Fluffy’s accidents on the floor. As I was cleaning it up Marco and Camillo came in.

“If that dog stays, I’m gonna need bail money,” muttered Camillo.

“Excuse me?” I asked in confusion.

“I said, if that dog stays, I’ll need bail money—because I’m gonna end up killing someone.”

“If you say so,” I replied, rolling my eyes.

“Why does the dog even do that?” complained Camillo. Although he looked like a thug with his thick neck, huge arms and endless tattoos, I had seen a much softer side to him when he was with his siblings. I was beginning to think that he was less scary than I originally thought.

Marco was glaring at the puddle. I’m not sure why he was so annoyed. I wasn’t asking him to clean it up.

“He’s marking his territory. Just as all you alpha males like to—you know, when you are having your pissing contests to see who can be the biggest Made Man.”

Marco stood watching me with one eyebrow raised while Camillo scowled at me and stomped off.

***

That evening I was lying in bed while Marco showered.

I felt myself softening when I thought about my life here in Chicago with Marco. And I was definitely attracted to him—he could ignite my desire with a single look or with the whisper of a touch.

I loved the feel of his toned muscles under my hands. Before, his strength had scared me; now, it made me feel protected somehow. I felt myself reaching out to him more and more.

But then I would worry about my family, and particularly Jessica, and that would cause guilt and resentment to come bubbling back up to the surface. I felt disloyal to my family for entertaining any feelings for this man, for letting him kiss me, and for letting him touch me.

I wondered what things would have been like if we had gotten married as originally planned and there'd been no shootout or bloody wedding?

When Marco got into bed, I decided to talk to him about Jessica.

"Marco…I'm worried about Jess. She really didn't seem like herself. I could tell during the call that she was really anxious and stressed."

"It'll be wedding nerves. Most brides must feel the same before their wedding day."

"Yes, but it seemed more than that. If it was just wedding nerves, she would have said and talked to me about it."

"Maybe she didn't want to talk about it because she knew that I was listening to the call. Your parents are probably stressed about her wedding after the shit-show that was yours, and they are probably projecting that stress onto Jessica."

I still wasn't convinced. I knew Jess too well. "Do you think that I could call her again? Without you listening in? She might be more willing to talk to me if you weren't there."

“That’s not going to happen. I don’t want you hatching another escape plan.”

“I won’t try to escape again, I promise.”

“No.”

“Please. Maybe—”

“No. And that’s the end of the matter.”

I knew that I wasn’t going to get any further with Marco tonight.

I still believed that Jess’s worries weren’t just down to wedding nerves, and I couldn’t stop myself from worrying. And I couldn’t help thinking that Jess would talk to me if it was just me and her.

JULIANA

It was Saturday morning and Marco, Alessio and Camillo were out seeing to business matters. Danio was at a friend’s house, while Debi was at home with me.

Palmina, one of the maids, had come in this morning to do some cleaning. Palmina was the daughter of a Fratellanza soldier. Outsiders weren’t trusted in our homes. On my way downstairs I saw her in Debi’s bedroom, cleaning up and talking to Debi at the same time.

When I got down to the kitchen, I saw Debi’s cell phone sitting on the kitchen counter. Knowing no one was home, I quickly picked it up and lit up the screen.

It was pin-protected. Damn it.

I slammed the phone back onto the counter, frustrated beyond belief.

I looked back down at Debi's phone and then scanned the living area to see if there were any other cell phones lying around that I could try. But I came up empty—Marco must have instructed everyone to keep their phones away from me and to have them pin-protected. Damn him!

What about Palmina's phone? It would be in her car because the staff wasn't permitted to bring phones into the mansion. If I could go out to Palmina's car to get her phone, hopefully it wouldn't be pin-protected and I could call Jess from it.

I saw Palmina's car keys on the kitchen counter—together with the red Chicago Bulls hoodie that she always wore to work and her sunglasses.

What if I borrowed Palmina's car and drove back to L.A. to see Jess?

As the idea hit me, a surge of adrenaline raced through my limbs.

Either I could hope that Marco would eventually permit me to talk to Jess again, or I could take a stand against his cruel games.

His refusal to allow this one small phone call made things crystal clear to me. Marco didn't see me as a real person with feelings, worries, and needs. This one man had turned my world upside down and endangered those I loved the most. He had directed his men to shoot Jess, he'd hurt Jake, and he'd ordered Cornelio's death. I had been kidnapped by him and forced to come to Chicago, and since then, I'd been held here against my will.

Marco was a monster in every sense of the word.

I couldn't betray my family by thinking of him in any other way, and I could never trust this man who had stolen me away from my life.

To him, I was a piece of property, his possession to flaunt in front of the Società as a symbol of his revenge.

I made a plan quickly in my mind. Palmina and Debi were up in Debi's bedroom. All the bedrooms had locks—as I well knew after my captivity in

Marco’s bedroom when I first arrived in Chicago. Without giving myself time to think and change my mind, I went upstairs and casually joined in Palmina and Debi’s conversation.

While we were talking, I snuck the key from the inside of Debi’s bedroom door into my pocket.

I left the bedroom and quickly shut the door and turned the key from the outside.

“Juliana? What are you doing?” asked Debi in a confused voice.

“I’m really sorry but I have to leave. I’m sure someone will be home soon. I’m really sorry.”

And then I turned on my heel and rushed down the stairs. I could hear Debi and Palmina calling from the room upstairs. “Juliana! Juliana!”

I told myself that I had to ignore them, or my guilt would make me have second thoughts.

I put my hair up in a ponytail similar to how Palmina normally had it. We both had dark hair, although hers was slightly curly. I added her sunglasses and zipped up her red Chicago Bulls hoodie around me.

I looked in the mirror at the front door and hoped that the guards wouldn’t look too closely when I tried to drive through the gates.

I grabbed some money from the jar in the kitchen cupboard where I knew cash was kept. Luckily it was well-stocked with one-hundred-dollar notes.

I picked up the car keys and I was about to rush out the door when I thought about Mr. F. I shook some dry food into his dog bowl and filled up his water bowl. I gave him a pat on the head and told him to be good.

I quickly made my way outside and used Palmina’s car keys to get inside her car. Without stopping to think about it any further, I started the engine and drove toward the perimeter gates.

I held my breath as I neared the gates. My heart was in my mouth.

The guards opened the gates and waved me through. Luck must have been on my side for once. I wanted to hit the accelerator as soon as I was out of the gates, but I knew that I couldn't act suspiciously.

Once I was a good distance away from the Marchiano estate, I pulled over and checked Palmina's cell phone. It was pin protected, damn. I knew Marco might try to track her phone, so I removed the sim card and ditched both it and the phone in a trash can.

MARCO

She had promised me. She had promised me that she would not try to run again.

She had betrayed me and betrayed my trust. Even worse, she had betrayed Debi.

My blood was coursing through my veins, making it difficult for me to think straight.

When I arrived home, Alessio had already gotten there before me and was trying to trace Juliana. "We're trying to track Palmina's phone. It was in her car. It might give us Juliana's location."

I looked across at Debi who was red-eyed and looked shaken. "Hey shortcake, are you okay?" I asked, taking Debi into my arms and giving her a hug.

"Yes," sniffed Debi. "I don't understand why Juliana did this."

"Neither do I. But don't worry, I'm going to get her back."

At that moment Mr. F decided to pee on the floor. “For God’s sake, someone take that dog into the garden.”

Danio was also back now. “I’ll take him out. Come on, Debi, it might cheer you up if you come outside and play with Mr. Fluffy.”

Alessio looked up from his laptop. “I’ve tracked Palmina’s phone to a gas station near the interstate. She must be heading for L.A. That would be her obvious destination.”

“Call the airfield and tell them to get the jet ready. Get some of our soldiers together and be ready to leave in ten minutes,” I ordered Alessio. “Camillo, you stay here with the kids and let us know if you find out anything else.”

Alessio and I drove to the private airfield. Fury had taken over my body. She has a head-start on us of over six hours.

She might have gotten away, but we could easily cut her off before she reached her family in L.A. It would take almost thirty hours for her to drive there, but we could travel that distance in a fraction of the time in our jet.

When we arrived at the airfield, we drove our SUV straight up to the jet which was being refueled. I hurried onto the jet while Alessio stood on the tarmac talking to the pilot.

Alessio came on board. “You’re not going to like this, Marco.”

“Spit it out,” I barked.

“The pilot says we can’t take off because fog is starting to shroud the city.

“Fuck it!” I slammed my fist onto the table in front of me. “How long until it clears?”

“They’re not sure yet.”

“Tell the fucking pilot to look at the fucking forecast. I want an answer in two minutes!” I roared.

I got up and started pacing up and down the aisle until Alessio came back. “The fog is going to be bad. It isn’t forecast to lift until tomorrow evening at the earliest.”

Fuck! Juliana already had over six hours head-start on us, plus the flight would take another four hours. If we couldn’t take off until tomorrow evening, then we might not make it in time to cut her off.

I looked at Alessio. “We’re driving to L.A.” We had to try to catch up with Juliana. “Come on!” I shouted over my shoulder, running back down to our SUV.

As I got back into our car, only one thought was in my mind: when we caught Juliana, she would be sorry that she ever lied to me.

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CHAPTER 32

JULIANA

I drove solidly for the thirty hours it took to get to L.A.

I stopped only for gas, food, and coffee along the way, plus twice I took a half-hour break to take a quick nap.

I knew that Marco would try to find me. It was a race against time. I ate the food as I drove and the coffee had triple-shots of caffeine, providing me with sustenance for the grueling journey.

Worries kept niggling at me, but I had come this far, and I couldn’t turn back now.

MARCO

As Alessio drove our SUV, I sat next to him in the passenger seat, dark emotions rolling off me in waves.

“Even if we don’t manage to cut her off before she reaches her family, we’ll still find a way to get her back,” said Alessio in a grim voice.

I wished I could believe that. If she made it into the Società’s hands, I knew they would never let her go.

Her running away and her rejection of me was like a red-hot blade piercing my heart. Especially because I’d thought that she’d begun to accept our relationship and life together. I’d even thought that she’d started to develop feelings for me.

It had bothered me when I saw that she was upset about her sister, but the thought of losing her was even worse—it was unbearable.

JULIANA

It was dark when I reached L.A. the following evening. The last day and a half had seemed like a week; I was utterly exhausted.

I headed straight for my father’s mansion. The adrenaline pumping through my body kept me alert. I had to talk to Jessica.

I parked a short distance away and left Palmina’s car there. I walked up to the edge of the mansion’s grounds, keeping to the shadows.

I knew that my father had soldiers patrolling the perimeter. I watched them on their regular patrol route and when I judged it safe, I quickly headed to the side gate.

I didn’t have a keycard, but I could try entering the code via the number pad. I held my breath as I typed in the security code and thanked the

heavens that the code hadn’t been changed as the gate opened, allowing me to slip in.

Once I was in the grounds, I kept myself pressed up as close to the house as possible so that it would shadow me from view. My heart was beating so fast that I was sure it would give me away. I tried to steady my breathing, but nothing would calm my nerves.

I moved around the house until I got just underneath Jess’s bedroom window. I had picked up a few small pieces of gravel from the driveway and aimed a piece at a time at Jess’s window. The first two pieces missed, my aim not being helped by my shaking hands.

I told myself to calm down and wiped my hands against the sides of my jeans. Then I tried again and this time the gravel hit its target. I waited but no one came to the window. Damn

I threw three more pieces of gravel against the window and a minute later I saw Jess’s drapes twitch.

I stepped out from the shadows finally so that Jess could see me in the moonlight. I saw surprise and confusion break out across her face and I put my finger to my lips, warning her to be quiet. She quickly went to open her window.

“Juliana, what are you doing here?” she said in a loud whisper. “Does Father know that you’re here?”

“No. No one can know but you. Come down to the garden. I’ll meet you by the big oak tree and I’ll explain everything. Bring Jake with you.”

I made my way to what we had always called ‘the big oak tree’. It was big, but now that we were grown up, it didn’t seem nearly as enormous as it had when we were small children. In that way it had lost a little of its

magic, but then I guess the same thing happened in life when you grew up and learned the realities of the world.

The tree had a circular bench that wrapped around the trunk. It was mine and Jessica's favorite place to go when we had wanted to get away from Mother and Father.

The night air was chilly, but I hardly felt it as I waited for Jessica. I needed to talk to Jessica alone to try and get out of her what was troubling her. Once I got to the bottom of the issue, I would speak to Jake as well—I really needed to see him, to check how he was and to apologize for what he had gone through at the hands of Marco.

A couple of minutes later Jessica appeared, having put a robe on and her sneakers. As soon as she saw me, she flew into my arms and started sobbing.

"I'm so glad to see you, Juliana! What are you doing here?"

"I had to come and see you, Jess."

"Are you okay, Juliana? What did they do to you? I thought I would never see you again."

"I'm okay—I'm just so glad to see you. Where's Jake?"

"He's away for a few days in Canada talking to our suppliers." The Società had various drug import routes, including one through the Canadian border.

"Damn, I really needed to see him too."

"Are you really okay, Juliana?"

I pulled back and searched Jessica's eyes. "Yes. It's you that I'm worried about. What's going on, Jess?"

She averted her gaze. "There's nothing wrong."

"Jess, I know you too well." My voice was gentle. "Please let me help."

“It’s just wedding nerves. You know how it is—you were nervous before your wedding day.”

“Is it really just nerves about the wedding? I know it’s something more than that. Please tell me. Please let me help you, Jess.”

“There’s nothing else, Juliana. It’s been a lot lately. First getting shot, then losing you, and there’s been so much tension at home since your kidnapping. Then the engagement suddenly happening and before I knew it, I was signing the engagement contract.”

“You know you can still talk to me even though I’m a Marchiano now, don’t you?”

“I can’t believe the wedding eventually went ahead. Father was furious when he found out that Marco Marchiano made you his wife after all.” Jess was trying to change the subject, but she wasn’t fooling me.

“How’s Jake?” I asked, guilt washing over me as I thought about how he suffered at Marco’s hands following the failed rescue attempt.

“He doesn’t blame you, Juliana. He’s healing and has already thrown himself back into work. It’s not your fault those savages beat and bloodied him.”

“But it is my fault,” I cried. “Everything is my fault. You are having to marry Rafael to strengthen the Società after my kidnapping, and Jake was hurt trying to rescue me. You’re my siblings. I would do anything to protect you both. I never wanted any of this to happen…” My voice trailed off, and we hugged each other again, both in tears by now.

I knew that Jess was holding back and not telling me something. I was about to press her again for details and urge her to confide in me, when a figure stepped out of the shadows, startling me.

“What the hell is the meaning of this?”

My head whipped round at the sound of the voice. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck.

“Father.” My voice shook as I addressed him.

“Jessica—go upstairs,” he ordered.

Jessica suddenly looked uneasy.

“I love you, Jess,” I said, quickly giving her one last hug. “Tell Jake I’m sorry for what he went through when he came to rescue me. I never wanted him to get hurt.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Jessica, get upstairs now or I’ll drag you up there myself!” bellowed my father.

I reluctantly let her go and watched her walk away with one last look over her shoulder at me. I slowly turned my gaze toward my father.

“What are you doing here?” my father snarled at me.

“I had to speak to Jess and Jake…”

“Jessica and Jacob are nothing to do with you anymore. You’re no longer part of this family. You are dead to us.”

“I had to make sure that they were alright—”

“Alright? Have you lost your mind?” He thundered. “You behave like a slut, opening your legs for the enemy and marrying him, and then you dare show your face here?” The news of my marriage to Marco in Chicago had obviously not been received well within the Società.

“But, Father, he took me—I didn’t have a choice that day.”

“And it took you all of twenty-four hours before you were in his bed,” he said in disgust.

“It wasn’t like that, Father. You were the one who made me sign the engagement contract. There was no way out for me after that—you know

that.” My voice was pleading with my father, imploring him to understand.

“That contract was just a sham to get as many of the Marchianos and their men in L.A. so that we could take them out,” he snapped.

My blood ran cold. Marco had been right: my father and the Società had planned this all along, and Jess and I had just been collateral damage. I’d been made to sign an irrevocable contract and then got kidnapped, and Jess had been shot by the first bullet that had been shot by the Società. Oh my God.

“Father, how could you have let Jessica get shot?” My voice was full of shock.

“She’s just a girl. What does it matter if she got hurt? The important thing was to get rid of the Marchianos. It was the best chance we’ve had in years, but it all got messed up by your stupid sister getting in the way of the bullet.”

I shakily got to my feet. “I should leave now.”

“What do you mean? You’re here now and you won’t be going anywhere ever again,” he spat.

“But, Father, I’m married to Marco.” My voice rose in horror. Surely, he couldn’t be meaning that he wanted me to stay in L.A. now?

“As if I don’t know that already. It’s all anyone in the Società is talking about. Did you think we wouldn’t learn of your betrayal? News like that travels fast. You’re a whore and a traitor—and you’ll be punished accordingly.”

He grabbed my arm and marched me back toward the mansion. “W-what are you doing?” I stammered.

“You’ll be locked in your room until we decide your punishment. Then you’ll be taken to the stables.”

“The stables?” My voice shook. The mansion’s former stables were now my father’s torture rooms. “Please, Father,” I pleaded. “Just let me go and I’ll never come back to L.A. again, I swear!”

My feet stumbled as terror made my movements clumsy. If my father hadn’t been holding onto me, I was sure that I would have fallen to the ground.

“You’ve made a laughing-stock of me. My men will think that I am weak because I can’t even control my own daughter. You have jeopardized my position in the Società,” he hissed.

He dragged me up the stairs toward my bedroom. I tried to pull out of his hold, but it was no good. “Why are you doing this?” I cried.

“You made your bed and now you’ll lie in it,” he yelled at me.

He shoved me into the room, and he slammed the door shut. I heard the key turn.

After a few seconds I tried the door. It was locked, just as I knew it would be.

I looked around myself at my childhood bedroom before slumping down onto the bed and letting my tears overwhelm me.

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CHAPTER 33

JULIANA

A couple of hours later, I heard the key turn, and my mother entered the room.

“Mother!” I cried, hurriedly getting to my feet to run into her arms. I froze when I saw the look of disgust on her face.

“Juliana, what is the meaning of this? A soldier woke me and your father up to tell us they had detected an intruder and that it was you.”

“Mother, I was worried about Jess and needed to see how she was, and I wanted to see Jake too.” My words tumbled out all at once.

I looked at my mother’s appearance. She has dressed in a purple glitter-effect skirt and jacket, with a bright red blouse and red six-inch heels. She had put on a full face of make-up and a cloud of perfume wafted around her.

“W-why are you dressed like that?” A surrealness was smothering my senses.

“Your return is significant. Your father may have to call over Emanuel Santino to discuss your punishment. I need to be dressed appropriately for visitors.”

What mother would be concerned more with dressing up to the nines rather than rushing to greet her kidnapped daughter?

I took a tentative step toward her, but the look she gave me halted my approach. She was repulsed by me. She, too, thought that I was a whore. “Mother, what’s going to happen to me now?” I asked in a shaky whisper.

“That’s up to your father. I’ve washed my hands of you. Honestly, you have no consideration for what you’ve put me or your father through.”

“But Father said it was the Società’s plan all along to target the Marchianos through a sham wedding. It was you and Father who wanted me to marry Marco…”

“Your father says you weren’t supposed to run off with him. How could you, Juliana? And that photograph he sent!”

“I didn’t run off with him! You saw it yourself—he dragged me away—”

“I can’t talk about this any longer. I always had such high hopes for you, Juliana, but you’ve thrown it all away.” My mother huffed dramatically as she swept out of my room.

I watched her in disbelief. I’d thought that at least my mother would help me and talk some sense into my father.

I had always made excuses to myself for my parents’ behavior when I was growing up. I’d thought that my father was cold because of the face he had to hold up for the Società, while my mother was unable to show affection toward her children because others might judge such displays of

affection as a weakness. I had always believed, nevertheless, that my parents loved me and cared about me in their own way.

Today I could no longer deny the reality: that my father cared only about power, and my mother cared only about appearances.

That night I fell into an uneasy sleep, where I was chased by men with guns and could find no safety.

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When I woke the next morning, I was still exhausted.

As it became light, I got up and went to wash my hands and face in my adjoining bathroom. I returned to the bedroom and sat on the bed, trying to quell my panic.

God, I'd been so stupid.

Marco had told me all along that my family and the Società were behind the shooting. After what my father told me, I knew Marco had been right: my father had known about the church shootout plan, and he had deliberately endangered our family in the Società's fucked up scheme to gain more power.

Why hadn't I believed Marco? And why had I ever thought it was a good idea to come back to L.A.? I couldn't stop these thoughts from going around my head, rubbing at my temples as they throbbed with exhaustion, upset, and fear.

A few hours later, I could see by my bedside clock that it was lunchtime, but I hadn't even been given breakfast yet. Maybe they would starve me as

part of my punishment?

I hadn’t heard any activity outside my door at all since my mother’s visit. With the impossibility of breaking out of this place, my father obviously didn’t need to put a guard outside my room.

***

Later, I heard footsteps. Terror ran riot through my body.

I heard the lock turn. The door slowly creaked open.

A soldier stood with a tray of food. I recognized him as one of my father’s men and was about to plead to him for help. Then I was struck by the look of utter coldness he gave me.

He thought I was a whore—just like my father and the rest of the Società. There was disgust in his stare, and I felt myself wilting under his gaze, being reduced down to someone who was unworthy of the Società and their protection.

He shoved the tray toward me, and I took it with trembling hands. He retreated and banged the door shut, the sound reverberating through my every bone. I listened as the lock clicked into place and his footsteps receded.

I sat on the bed with the tray. It held a sandwich and a bottle of water. I was ravenous and eagerly ate the food.

MARCO

We hadn’t been able to get to Juliana. Our sources told us that she’d reached her family and the protection of the Società. My muscles were tense as the rage churned through my body.

We were holed up in a safe house just outside L.A.’s city center. We were playing with fire just being here, but I wasn’t going to give up Juliana without a fight.

I looked across at Alessio. We were trying to draw up a plan to get her back, but the Bonardi mansion’s perimeter was near-impossible to get past.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

JULIANA

In the late evening, I pricked up my ears as I heard a sound outside my door.

I jumped to my feet—I hadn’t heard anyone approaching this time.

As I heard the door’s lock turn, I retreated to the furthest wall from the door, as if that could somehow save me from what was about to happen.

“Juliana?” I heard a hesitant whisper.

Oh my God, it was Jess! I ran up to the door and hurled myself into her arms. “Jess, what are you doing here?” I said in a hoarse whisper.

“I had to come,” she said as she quietly shut the door behind her.

“Jess, it’s not safe. Father will punish you as well if he finds out you came to see me.”

“I couldn’t just leave you here.” She slid something into my hand. It was a keycard and some cash. “The code on the gates has been changed. This keycard will unlock them.”

“Where did you get this?” I asked in confusion.

“I took it from Father’s office. He left his suit jacket hanging on the back of his chair and it was in the pocket.”

“Father will kill you when he realizes you helped me.”

“He won’t know it was me. There are no cameras in here. He’ll think that you picked the lock somehow and that you found a keycard in the house, or a soldier dropped one or something like that. It doesn’t matter what he thinks—you just need to get out of here. I heard Father talking on his cell phone. I don’t know what they’re going to do to you, but he said you need to be punished and made an example of. He said they should kill you!”

My panic was rising again.

I gave my sister one last hug with tears in my eyes. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to see you again, Jess. Please take care of yourself. I’ll try to call you again.”

As Jess went back to her bedroom, I hurried downstairs, letting myself out of the back door. I crept through the back gardens, knowing that the side gate would be my best bet for slipping away undetected.

My heart was thumping as I held the keycard to the fob at the side gate. I flinched as the electronic bleep sounded loudly.

As soon as the gate opened, I rushed through it and then ran off into the shadows.

I needed to get as far as possible from the mansion before they noticed I was missing—I knew without a doubt that my father would send out every available man to search for me once my escape was discovered.

I was wearing only my jeans and a t-shirt. It was getting chilly now. I headed toward the main road and was half walking, half running, when I heard a car coming up behind me.

I darted nearer the wall of the property I was passing, hoping its shadow would obscure me.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that the approaching car was old, bright red and nothing like what a Made Man would drive. In that split second, I ran into the road in front of it and flagged it down.

An elderly man was driving. “Miss, you scared me there!” he exclaimed after rolling down his window.

“I’m so sorry, sir. I was walking home and I was robbed. The man took my purse and coat.” It wasn’t hard for me to look scared and shaken. “Please could you give me a lift to the main road, and I’ll catch a cab home from there. I don’t feel safe walking around these quiet streets.”

“I’ll call the police for you,” he said, reaching for his cell phone.

“Please, no, I just need to get away from here. Once I’m back home, then I’ll call the police. I’m afraid the man will come back. I’ve got some cash in my pocket—he didn’t check that when he took my purse, so I have enough money to get home.”

“There are some very dubious people living in this neighborhood,” he commented, no doubt referring to the rumors that had always circulated about my family being in the Mob.

I wished he would hurry up and gift me a lift—standing on the street like this was making my heart gallop in fear that one of my father’s men might drive past and see me. “I know, sir. I was visiting a friend here and just walking home when it happened.”

“Get in, miss. I’ll gladly take you to the main road. I could even drop you home or to the police station?”

“No, please, I couldn’t inconvenience you like that.” I couldn’t let him put himself in any more danger. If my father caught me now, he would kill

this man too.

As soon as we got to the main road, after thanking the man for the lift and assuring him I would be alright, I flagged down a cab and asked it to take me downtown. It was busy there and I would be harder to find.

Once I was there, I would find a phone. I'd ring Marco, tell him where I was, and ask him to get me—if, that was, Marco was still talking to me.

When we reached the busy downtown, I sank down in my seat as we passed Matrix, a nightclub owned by the Società—one of their legal businesses that they laundered their dirty money through. I only sat up again when we had safely passed it. I had come this far, and I wasn't going to take any unnecessary chances.

A couple of minutes later, the cab driver pulled over. After I paid him, I got out of the cab and looked around for a payphone. I spotted one and was about to head to it when I changed my mind.

I turned around and retraced the route the cab had driven. I headed toward Matrix.

It was Thursday night, and I knew that some of the guys held a weekly poker night in Matrix's back office on Thursdays.

I had to see Gabriel Santino.

I was taking a chance. I knew he attended the poker night on occasion—Jake had mentioned it once—but there was no certainty that he would be here tonight.

I didn't even know what I was planning to do if I saw him, but I had to try.

Reaching the club, I knew I wasn't dressed appropriately and would stick out like a sore thumb. I definitely didn't want anyone from the Società seeing me before I got to Gabriel.

I headed around the back of the club toward the car park.

There I found a black convertible which I recognized as belonging to Gabriel. Anticipation started to race in my heart.

He was here, inside the club right now. I knew I had to wait until he came back out. I couldn't risk going inside and being seen by anyone but him.

I crouched down behind his car and hid in the darkness, praying no one would see me. If I got caught and handed back to my father, I knew he would punish me even harder after having the audacity to run from him. I prayed that my father wouldn't find out that Jess helped me—I couldn't bear for her to be hurt any further by my father's cruel actions, not when she had already been shot and injured at my wedding.

The minutes ticked by slowly as I kept looking at my watch. I didn't even know what I was going to say to him—how I was going to bring up what I needed to say.

I was freezing cold in my thin t-shirt, and I huddled into myself. I wished I could have walked around to keep myself warm, but I knew I had to stay hidden for now.

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After a couple hours of waiting, I felt ice-cold and wondered if this was crazy.

Seeing Gabriel might not even make a difference: he might hate me as much as my parents.

I had seen various people coming and going from Matrix, including a couple of Società men. When I had seen them, I had crouched even lower and barely dared to breathe, silently pleading to God not to let them see me.

My heart leapt into my throat when I finally saw the man I wanted to see.

He strode toward his car with his long-legged stride. Even in the dark, I could sense his commanding presence.

I came out of the shadows. “Gabriel,” I said, my voice soft in the night air.

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CHAPTER 34

JULIANA

Gabriel Santino. The future Capo of the Società Mafia.

I shivered as his gaze ran over me.

As soon as I'd stepped out from the darkness, he'd drawn his weapon.

"Juliana!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? Your father told us he was holding you at his mansion."

"I managed to get away. Gabriel…he was talking about killing me."

A look of anger passed over his face, "I know. I've been trying to persuade my father to intervene—to make sure that you are protected. But my father has said he won't interfere in a Bonardi family matter." I knew that the cruel Capo probably agreed with my father that I needed to be punished. "Why have you come? You must have known how dangerous it would be for you?"

“I had to come to see how Jessica is. I’m worried about her.”

“You don’t need to be. She’s fine.” Gabriel had scanned our surroundings and had lowered his revolver to his side when he saw that I was alone.

“Does she really have to marry your brother, Rafael?”

“It’s already arranged, and the date has been set. The wedding is due to be held soon.”

“But couldn’t you intervene and stop it somehow?” I pleaded.

His voice became softer. “You know that’s impossible once the contract has been signed, Juliana.”

“But why? It’s just a contract within our own organization. You have a lot of influence now—people will listen to you.”

“Not about that. If one family is allowed to break a contract, especially the family of the Capo or an Underboss, then our rules start to be eroded. You know I can’t allow that.”

“Gabriel—if you have ever cared for me, please will you try to stop the marriage?” I was begging him. “Jessica’s not as tough as me. I don’t think she’ll cope in a family like yours. Please?”

He paused, searching my eyes with his. “First tell me, Juliana, how are you?”

“I’m…okay.”

“You can talk to me, you know.” He had a look of concern on his face as he took a step nearer to me.

“There’s nothing anyone can do now,” I whispered.

“I meant it when I said I’d be here for you. How are you—really?” He reached out to place his hand on my arm.

I didn’t get to reply.

A movement caught Gabriel’s eye and he spun around aiming his gun.

But he was too late.

Out from the shadows stepped another figure.

Marco Marchiano.

MARCO

We had a mole within the Società who'd notified us forty minutes earlier that Juliana had been spotted lurking in the car park of a Società nightclub.

Our mole had been leaving the club when he'd spotted her, but he hadn't been able to seize her because he'd been with another soldier. Thankfully, that other soldier hadn't been as eagle-eyed as our mole.

I had rushed from our L.A. safehouse to the nightclub. I didn't know what she was doing there, but I would soon find out.

I parked my car near the club and walked around the back to the car park. My heart thudded when I caught sight of Juliana.

But she wasn't alone—she was with Gabriel Santino. My blood roared in my veins.

I quietly approached Juliana and Gabriel.

Gabriel spun around, raising his gun.

"Drop the weapon, Santino," I commanded. I already had my gun trained on him.

Gabriel slowly lowered his weapon, his expression remaining blank.

"Well, what do we have here? It looks like a big, cozy family reunion for the Società," I said, my words dripping with sarcasm.

I was furious with Juliana. But now I also wondered what Gabriel Santino was doing here. Had she planned this with him?

JULIANA

“You don’t have to go back with him, Juliana,” Gabriel said quickly. “More of our soldiers are inside the club and only moments away.”

He was trying to tell me to call for more help, regardless of what the warning would mean for him—and those consequences came swiftly as Marco shot him in the leg. The sound was muffled by the silencer on his gun.

I cried out and reached to help Gabriel, but Marco caught my arm in a painful grip and held me back.

Gabriel didn’t cry out for help after Marco shot him. He knew that if he did, that would mean certain death for him, me, or both of us.

I only had to scream out for help to come from the Società men inside the club, but I wouldn’t risk any more lives or any more bloodshed. Not when I loved Marco Marchiano. I didn’t understand how or when it had happened, but I did know that I couldn’t deny my love for him any longer.

“I’ve got no choice, Gabriel. I have to go back.” Before Gabriel could say or do anything else, Marco struck him with the butt of his revolver and knocked him out.

I screamed but Marco clamped his hand over my mouth and muffled my cry. With his other arm he held me firmly and dragged me away to his SUV, shoving me into the passenger seat. He took his hand away from my mouth. “Don’t make a sound, or I swear you’ll regret it.”

He swiftly moved around to the driver’s side and got in. He started the engine and within seconds we were speeding away from the club.

I looked around to see if anyone was following us, but it seemed clear. I felt sick to my stomach and hoped Gabriel was going to be alright. I couldn't bear for anyone else to suffer because of me.

Marco didn't say anything to me while he drove. I bit down on my lower lip, worrying about Jessica and Gabriel.

"Thank you for coming to get me," I whispered eventually. "My father said he was going to kill me."

"What the fuck, Juliana? How could you go back to your fucking family after everything they've put you through?"

"I didn't think this would happen…I just wanted to see Jess."

"And what exactly did you think would fucking happen? Your father and the Società are psychopaths. They already endangered you in that sham wedding—it could've easily been you that was shot instead of your sister. Your family thought nothing of starting a shootout in a church full of women and children. Do you really think that they truly care about you?"

"I know now that the Società started the shootout and they're the ones who shot Jess. I came to L.A. because I needed to see my sister. I never believed that my own family would want to hurt me…or would want to kill me," I said slowly, the horror still fresh in my mind.

"I've been trying to get you back," he said with a slightly softer tone in his voice. "I put my life on the line to get you back. We hadn't yet figured a way past the security at your father's mansion, and you managed to escape before I could get to you, but I would have got you out one way or another. There was no way I was going to just leave you there at your father's mercy."

God, I'd been such an idiot. I should have tried again to persuade Marco to let me contact Jess. Instead, I betrayed his trust.

Maybe he didn’t care about me in the same way I had come to care about him, but he did want to protect me in his own way. He’d come to L.A. to get me back—he’d put himself in acute danger, in the midst of enemy territory, to save me when I’d been stupid enough to go back to L.A. But this time, when faced with the choice between the Società or Marco, I had chosen Marco. There had been no hesitation in my mind: I had chosen love.

Marco had been right about my family, and I should have listened to him from the start. I could see from his expression that he was trying hard to keep his temper under control, and I knew now that my actions had hurt not just me, but also him.

I sank back into my seat. After a while, not knowing what to say, I asked, “Is Mr. F okay?”

“You should be more fucking worried about yourself, instead of worrying about that damn dog.”

After a minute’s silence, he continued. “Danio and Debi are looking after him. They’ve been enjoying it no doubt, although Alessio is still whining like a bitch about why the dog is still in the house.”

“How’s Debi?” I plucked up the courage to ask.

“She was really upset by what you did.”

I tried to explain to Marco how worried I was about Jessica, but he didn’t want to hear it and warned me to keep quiet. “I’m about five seconds from completely losing it with you, Juliana. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll shut up.”

Warily, I gazed out into the bleak darkness of the night. I was expecting a long drive back from L.A. to Chicago, so I was surprised when Marco pulled into an airfield. I looked at him.

“I’ve got a jet on standby. We’ll fly home. It’s late and I’ve had enough for today.”

At least we would get home more quickly.

“Get out,” he ordered, as he cut the engine and moved to exit the car.

He obviously wasn’t going to open my car door for me. *Such a gentleman.* But then given his current mood, I should have been glad that he hadn’t automatically put a bullet through my head.

We boarded the private jet and Marco pushed me into a seat. He didn’t sit near me; instead, he took a seat as far away from me as possible. About ten minutes later, Alessio also joined us on the jet. Alessio must have come to L.A. with Marco.

As the plane took off, I was reminded of the last time I was on a plane. That time Marco had also been dragging me to Chicago.

But things were different now. They were different because I loved Marco.

I don’t know when exactly the realization had hit me, but what had begun as a man kidnapping me had somehow led to me falling in love with him.

I still couldn’t understand what had happened between us since the day he’d taken me from the church and forced me to go to Chicago with him.

He was a Made Man and a killer, but over the last few weeks he had shown me a different side to him. It was a side that was unexpected: it was caring and protective.

This was a man who would lay down his life for those he loved. He had taken care of his siblings since the death of his parents, looking out for them and loving them. They were his world and he protected them with a fierceness that was almost scary—just like he had been trying to protect me from my cruel father and dysfunctional mother.

Being back in L.A. had made me see how wrong I'd been about my parents. Sure, they had arranged my marriage to a cruel Capo, but such marriages were a normal way of Mafia life. What wasn't normal, though, was using your child to set a trap for your enemy—letting your soldiers fire their weapons around your family and endangering them, and even shooting them like my sister had been shot.

Jess had been shot by a Società bullet: it may have not been deliberate, but my father knew the danger he was placing us all in when he and Emanuel came up with their messed-up plan. At least Marco had let me know how Jess was after she'd been shot. I doubted my father had even cared, given his comments regarding it when I'd been back in L.A.

I couldn't stop thinking about my father's words and they kept replaying in my mind. He thought I was a slut and a whore. There was no concern for what I had been through as a result of the kidnapping and its aftermath. My mother hadn't even been glad to see me back. I knew I should be angry at them both. What I really felt, though, was a deep hurt that I mattered so little to my parents.

After the last forty-eight hours, my body ached with exhaustion. As I sunk further back into my seat, I looked across at Marco and let my gaze linger.

I don't know when it had happened, but somewhere along this twisted journey I had fallen in love.

MARCO

It took four hours to fly back to Chicago. I didn’t talk to Juliana and barely looked at her. I didn’t want to see her, touch her, or smell her sweet jasmine scent.

When we landed in Chicago, cars were waiting for us. I tugged Juliana toward them, walking fast so that she had to hurry to keep up with me. We took one SUV while Alessio went in the other waiting vehicle.

It was a short drive back to the Marchiano estate. During the drive, however, exhaustion overcame Juliana and she fell asleep, her head resting against the seat and her full lips slightly parted. She’d had a long couple of days, and it was very late now.

I was furious with her, but added to my fury was a twisted thrill that I had her back. I couldn’t believe that she went crawling back to the Società, back to Gabriel Santino.

I wondered if she’d thought about him when I’d penetrated her perfect little pussy, stretching it around my cock and driving into it relentlessly until I felt her tight channel clenching in orgasm around me. She was mine. And her pussy was mine—mine alone.

When we arrived back at our estate, I turned off the ignition, but Juliana didn’t stir. I decided not to wake her. I scooped up her body into my arms and carried her upstairs to our bedroom.

I felt the smooth skin of her arm as it fell against my hand which was holding her. This was her home now, not L.A. and not the Società. It felt so right to have her back in my arms, back in my possession.

In the bedroom, I put her down onto the bed and pulled the sheets and comforter around her. I ran the back of my knuckles against her soft cheek which was tinged pink with sleep.

The gentleness of my caress was in direct opposition to the wrath I felt after what she had done, after who she had turned to and who she had tried to save: Gabriel Santino.

Taking one last look at her, I left the room and turned off the light.

I couldn’t be around her tonight; instead, I made my way to one of the guest rooms.

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CHAPTER 35

JULIANA

I woke in the morning still feeling exhausted and it took a few seconds for the memories of yesterday to come tumbling back into my consciousness. I opened my eyes and quickly turned around to look at Marco's side of the bed. He hadn't slept here.

I looked down at myself and saw that I was still dressed. I must have fallen asleep in the car on the way back from the airport, and he must have carried me up and put me to bed.

I carefully got out of bed and silently walked over to the bedroom door. I wasn't sure why I was being so quiet, unless it was because of the niggling fear within me. I held my breath as I tried the bedroom door handle. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was when I found that it was locked.

I went back and sat on the bed and waited.

After a short time had passed, I decided that I couldn’t sit here and do nothing. I got up and went to the bathroom to take a shower. I took off yesterday’s clothes and stood under the scalding water in the shower. It felt good to wash away some of the anxiety from yesterday as I felt the water cascading over my body.

I took my time shampooing and conditioning my hair, before soaping my body. Then I stood under the powerful spray, letting the hot water ease the tension in my shoulders. I closed my eyes and savored the hot rivulets running down my body.

My scalp prickled. I opened my eyes to find Marco standing at the bathroom door, staring at me.

“Hi,” I squeaked.

But he didn’t respond. He stalked over to the shower. “Get out.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, slowly reaching out to turn off the water. When the water stopped, I turned around and faced Marco.

“Out.”

I stepped out of the shower. As I reached for a towel, he grabbed my arm and hauled me into the bedroom. “Wait, I have to dry first.”

He ignored me. When we reached the foot of the bed, he spun around to face me.

The look in his eyes was wild and I took a step back from him, but he still had his hand grasping my arm and he yanked me back toward him.

MARCO

She looked fearful, but I didn’t care.

“Are you scared of me, beautiful?”

She didn’t reply, her eyes huge and wary as she watched me.

“Answer me,” I demanded, her lack of response angering me further.

“I—I don’t know,” she whispered.

What sort of fucking answer was that?

With one hand I held onto her wrist, feeling her racing pulse, while my other hand unbuckled my belt and pushed my pants and boxer briefs down.

I shoved my fingers between her legs. I could feel the slippery juices of her sex. “Fuck, you’re already wet for me.”

She shook her head at me as if attempting to persuade me otherwise.

I gave a cruel laugh. “Your soaking pussy doesn’t lie, beautiful.”

I pushed down on her shoulder and forced her to kneel in front of me, her blue eyes widening as they came level with my straining erection. She had given me quite a few blow jobs over the last few weeks, but they had always been on her terms.

Today that would change.

She had betrayed me and betrayed my trust. I needed to make her submit, make her obey.

My possessiveness knew no bounds, and after what had happened yesterday, this was the only way I knew to get her back to being mine.

I reached for her breasts and roughly twisted her nipples. She always loved it when I played with her breasts. But this time it wasn’t about her pleasure, and she winced at my harsh treatment of her tits.

I grabbed her silky hair into a ponytail and tugged her head back. She clamped her lips shut and didn’t comply, not until I tugged her hair more harshly so that she was forced to obey me.

She reluctantly opened her mouth, knowing what I wanted but thinking about whether she could defy me.

I shoved my cock into her mouth in one thrust.

She cried out, my hard rod muffling her sounds, and her small hands pushed against my muscular thighs as she struggled to take my whole thickness into her mouth.

Her wet mouth and soft tongue against the bare skin of my dick was heaven and I held her firmly in place so that she couldn't escape me.

Her cries were just making me even stiffer—I loved hearing her protests and feeling her small hands pushing against me and fighting me.

With each protest her perfect mouth made, her lips and tongue moved unwillingly against my hardness, making it leak pre-cum into her mouth as she squirmed her body against my hold.

"Do you want me to stop?" I asked in a harsh voice.

She faltered, panting through her exertions.

"Do you?" I demanded in a louder voice.

She gave a small shake of her head.

"Good girl," I growled at her.

She knew she deserved her punishment.

And that was all I needed.

The sight of her full lips stretched around my hardness made me swell even more. I started thrusting roughly into her mouth, hammering my hips back and forth in a punishing rhythm as I held her firmly in place.

She struggled at first with the pace I had set.

"Relax, beautiful, just relax into it," I said as tears leaked from her eyes, and I penetrated her tight lips again and again.

Slowly she stopped struggling as much and focused on taking a breath each time I withdrew from her mouth.

I anchored her head and mouth in place with my fist in her hair, making it clear who was in charge and who was her owner.

I don’t know if it was the lack of oxygen, but eventually her body became pliable and slackened, giving itself over to my demanding rhythm.

I was pushing into her mouth relentlessly. Each time I withdrew she would take a breath before taking another thrust of me between her lips. Her mouth became softer as she relaxed, allowing me to push my cock against the back of her throat.

She was now accepting me without gagging. The feeling of her upper throat swallowing around my dick was incredible.

I continued until I could hold back no longer, emptying my seed down her throat, forcing her to swallow every last drop, except for the bits that escaped down the sides of her mouth.

I used my finger to scoop up those stray drops. “Suck,” I commanded, and she obediently and willingly licked my finger clean. She looked at me in a daze.

After I let go of her hair, she slumped back onto her calves. I picked her up and threw her onto the mattress.

Before she could make any movement to escape, I pinned down her thighs with my hands and plunged my tongue into the valley between her legs.

“You’re so fucking wet. You got turned on by that blow job.”

I thrust my tongue into her channel, mimicking the action my cock would make, alternating this with sucks and nips on her swollen labia and engorged clit.

I was already hard again. I lined myself up with her tight entrance and slammed into her in one hard thrust, causing her to cry out.

My rough thrusts aroused her even further, making her even wetter, but even with that she struggled to accept my thick cock as my hips hammered her into the mattress.

She tried to resist her orgasm, but her body betrayed her because I could feel her pussy muscles clenching in the way they did when she approached her peak.

She was trying to fight it, she was trying to fight me, not wanting to give in to her climax. Not wanting to give me that prize—because she knew then she would be mine.

But everything about her, including her pussy, was mine.

I deepened my angle, hitting the sensitive spot at the front of her inner wall repeatedly until I forced the orgasm out of her, making her scream out my name. “Marco, please, Marco!”

That was the ultimate prize, hearing my name on her lips and hearing her scream out my name again and again with each of my punishing thrusts.

Her pussy clamped around me, triggering my second orgasm, and I pumped my cum deep inside her, making her pussy take all of it and all of me.

Afterward she lay limply in my arms, trying to catch her breath.

When she had calmed down, I should have cleaned her up. Instead, I held her to my chest, and we lay there with our limbs entwined, sweaty and sticky with our cum.

After this, she could be left in no doubt of who she belonged to. *She belonged to me.*

My treatment of her, and her submission to me, proved that she was mine: her body, mind, and soul.

As we lay in bed, after getting her breath back, Juliana finally looked up at me.

“You will never try to run away again,” I growled. “You will never get away from me.”

Her eyes were huge in her face. “I was always going to come back after I’d seen Jess,” she said quietly. “And I did come back.”

“You came back because it was the only choice you could make to save Gabriel Santino.”

“You don’t really think that?” Juliana asked.

“You said you had no choice. You said you were coming back with me because you had no choice if Gabriel Santino was to live. That’s the only reason you came back with me.”

Juliana looked uncertain as she spoke. “You’re right, I came back because I had no choice. I had no choice because…because I love you. I love you even after everything that has happened, despite how messed up that is. Despite how fucked up this thing between you and me is.”

JULIANA

Marco just stared at me.

I loved Marco, and I knew I had to tell him how I felt. I had betrayed him and hurt him deeply when I had gone to L.A.

Marco thought that I came back with him to Chicago to save Gabriel’s life, but I had to tell him the real reason. I came back to Chicago because I

loved Marco.

I couldn’t go on betraying him, and I’d be doing that if I let him go on thinking that Gabriel had been my priority. That thought was hurting Marco, and I didn’t want to hurt him—I wanted to love him.

Thinking back about everything that had happened, I understood now how much Marco cared about me. Marco had risked his own life by coming to rescue me from L.A. after my stupid plan to see Jess all went wrong.

I looked at Marco and waited for him to say something. He looked like he was going to speak, but then I saw a flicker of confusion in his eyes before his characteristic emotionless expression returned.

Without another word, he got up and took a shower before getting dressed and heading downstairs. As I watched his tall figure walk out of the room, I didn’t hear the lock turn in the bedroom door.

I got up and tried the door handle and found that he had left it open. Deciding not to give him time to change his mind, I quickly showered again and got dressed.

As I dressed, I thought about how I had just admitted to Marco that I loved him. I couldn’t deny it any longer, and I didn’t want to.

He might be a Made Man, but I had seen a softer side to him, a side that didn’t live in the darkness of our world. He cared for his family with a protective fierceness. And I could see that he did care for me in his own way, although I knew he would never love me after everything that had happened.

After dressing, I made my way down to breakfast. I hardly ate anything yesterday and I was ravenous.

As I made my way down the stairs, I couldn’t stop thinking about my relationship with Marco.

He was possessive—maybe too possessive—but he had been trying to protect me from my family.

How could I not love a man who was devoted to his family and tried to protect me from mine? Who wanted to look after me and stop me from getting hurt?

He wanted to give me a life away from my dysfunctional family, a family who had shot my own sister and put me in harm's way. I knew Marco was different: he would never harm his family, and he would never hurt me. But more importantly, this was a man who made my whole being burn with desire and my heart beat much too fast.

When I reached the kitchen, I saw that Danio and Debi were not down for breakfast yet and Mr. Fluffy wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Danio, bring that damn dog down here before Alessio finds out you let it sleep in your room," Marco hollered up the stairs.

I felt like pointing out that Alessio probably heard Marco yelling, as had most of the neighborhood, but thought it wise to keep my remarks to myself given the mood Marco was in.

A minute later, Danio and Debi came downstairs with Mr. F tucked up in Debi's arms. When I saw Debi, I couldn't help it and burst into tears. "I'm so sorry, Debi. I shouldn't have done what I did yesterday to you. Can you ever forgive me?"

I was crying because I was sorry that I hurt Debi, and I was crying because I couldn't help Jessica yesterday. Debi was also my little sister now, just like Jessica.

Debi came toward me and gave me that sweet smile of hers. "Don't cry, Juliana. We weren't locked in the room for long before Alessio came home.

Of course I forgive you. I know that you had to see your sister. Was she alright when you saw her yesterday?"

"I'm not sure," I sniffed. "But I really needed to see her. I'll have to apologize to Palmina too and deal with getting her car back and getting her a new cell phone. I hope she'll forgive me, but I'll understand if she can't."

"Can I take Mr. Fluffy for a walk before breakfast?" asked Debi shyly, as she smiled at me.

"Of course. I can see that he's getting quite attached to you now," I said with a wobbly smile back at her.

MARCO

We carried on like this for the next few days.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't understand Juliana. She had fought me since she had set foot in this house and then she had run off back to L.A. I didn't know what I was supposed to think anymore.

I virtually ignored her, except for at mealtimes and at night when I would seek out her body and she would respond willingly.

One morning I was in our gym room training with Alessio and getting my ass kicked by him. "What's wrong? You haven't been yourself since we returned from L.A."

"I'm fine," I said tersely.

"We got her back. That's all that matters," Alessio drawled.

I paused, not sure how to explain. "She said she loves me."

Alessio raised an eyebrow. "Juliana? Is that why you've been in such a foul mood for the last few days?"

“I’m always in a fucking foul mood in case you haven’t noticed.”

“You know what I mean,” replied Alessio. He looked at me carefully. “So, what’s the problem? You know after everything that’s happened, this could only turn out in one of two ways—love or hate.”

When I didn’t respond, Alessio probed further. “What did you say to her?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t say anything?”

“I don’t know if I believe her. She said that’s why she came back with me and that she always planned to come back to Chicago after seeing her sister.”

“For a fucking genius, you’re pretty obtuse sometimes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s clear that she intended to come back. Think about it. It’s obvious in how she looks at you now that she no longer hates you. Things are different between the two of you than when you first brought her here. She’s happy here now. She’s happy being with *you*.”

I just looked at Alessio, not sure what to make of what he had just said.

Alessio carried on. “Anyway, she wouldn’t have left the dog here if she was planning to stay away forever. She had Palmina’s car, and she could easily have taken Mr. F with her to L.A.”

I stopped training and thought about what he had said. I felt confused—it was a new feeling for me and a feeling I wasn’t sure I liked.

JULIANA

That night, we went to bed and Marco still remained largely silent.

I stole a glance at him, unsure if he would ever forgive me for going to L.A. Even worse, I didn't know how he felt about me telling him that I loved him.

I hadn't chosen Marco to be my husband, nor to be kidnapped by him. After everything that had happened between us, I wanted Marco to want me for myself—not as his captive or as someone he owned through the contract, but as someone he loved.

I knew that I was probably too late to save my relationship with him.

He had kidnapped me at the start, but then he had shown me that he cared about me. He'd wanted to protect me from my family, but I had betrayed him after all the care he'd shown me. He didn't just want to look after me physically, but he also wanted to protect my emotions. That was why he'd let me know how my sister was after she'd been shot, so that I'd stop worrying about her injury.

That's also why he'd not killed Jacob when he caught him entering the Marchiano estate. I'd been so distraught about my brother getting hurt, I'd ignored that Marco had actually spared him. Marco should have killed Jacob after he'd caught him, but he'd let him go and he'd done that for me.

Those weren't things a captor would do for his captive. To him, I'd been more than a captive, more than a possession that he'd acquired through the contract between our families. He'd tried to show me this, but I'd thrown it all back in his face by running off to L.A.

Over the last few days, I kept turning over in my head recent events. I knew why he was mad that I went to L.A., but I couldn't just abandon my sibling when she needed me. Even worse, I hadn't even been able to help

Jess because my father had turned up before she could tell me what was wrong.

Between my worry for Jess and Marco's reign of silence toward me, I was feeling utterly dejected. The only things that brightened my days were the fact that Debi wasn't mad at me and that I had my dog for company—both Debi and Mr. Fluffy were definitely glad to have me back.

I fell asleep, turning over in my mind the words I'd finally admitted to Marco and wondering if he could ever love me back in the same way.

MARCO

I bolted upright in bed as I was suddenly woken.

I grabbed my gun and ran my gaze around the room before picking up my phone to check the security feeds and guard reports. I already knew I would find everything as it should be.

"Marco…?" murmured Juliana sleepily from next to me.

"Go back to sleep."

"Are you okay?" she asked, pushing her hair out of her face and gazing at me. "Is something wrong?"

I sighed. "I can't stop thinking about our mom being killed…about my siblings having to grow up without her. I can't stop blaming myself."

"It wasn't your fault, Marco." Her voice was soft.

"Alessio was there that day, but I should have taken charge. I was the future Capo. A Capo-to-be and I wasn't even able to take care of one scumbag soldier who was skimming a few measly grand off our profits—and I wasn't able to stop our lunatic father from killing our mom."

“You have to stop blaming yourself,” Juliana said, moving closer to me.

“I barely sleep some nights, dreaming about the day she died. Even worse are the dreams where I imagine a life where our mom didn’t die, and then the crushing moment when I wake to reality.”

Juliana spoke quietly into the silence, her hand resting gently on my arm. “You saved me from my family. So why can’t you forgive yourself for saving your siblings from your father, a man so cruel that he killed your mother?”

“I don’t feel guilt about many things in my life, but this is something that keeps tormenting me.”

“Your family is your Achilles’ heel. You hurt when you think that they might be hurting.”

“How do I stop feeling like this?” I asked in desperation.

“You won’t ever stop loving your family, so you won’t ever stop caring about them…just like I’ll never stop caring about my siblings. You have to forgive yourself. They don’t blame you, so you shouldn’t either.”

Was she right—was I being too hard on myself? And was I also being too hard on her? She actually seemed to care about what I was going through, and I was stunned that she was offering me comfort after everything I’d done to her.

I never normally talked about my feelings of guilt to anyone, not even Alessio. For some reason, however, it felt right telling Juliana. Not only that, it also made me feel like part of a load had been lifted from my shoulders.

While these thoughts ran through my head, I looked down at Juliana. She looked fucking serene—like an angel.

Without thinking any more about it, I lay down and took her into my arms. And, for once, I managed to fall back asleep.

MARCO

The next evening, it was still warm when I went with Juliana and Mr. F on their evening walk in the woods.

We followed Mr. F's route, walking together in silence.

"Are you happy?" I asked Juliana suddenly.

She looked surprised at my question, or maybe she was thinking that this was the longest sentence I had spoken to her since I had brought her back from L.A. She hesitated as she thought about my question. "Sometimes," she replied.

"What would make you happy the rest of the time?"

When she didn't answer, I captured her hand in mine and pulled her to a halt. "Answer me, Juliana."

She avoided my intent gaze on her. "What do you want me to say? I feel stupid enough as it is."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You've ignored me ever since I admitted that I love you. How else am I supposed to feel except stupid?" Her words came out in a rush. "I know it's messed up, falling for the man who kidnapped me. I can't help how I feel, I just wish I hadn't blurted it out to you."

I raised her chin up with my hand. "Look at me."

She slowly raised her bright blue eyes to mine. God, every time I looked into those eyes, my heart stopped for a moment. "I'm glad you told me,

Juliana."

"You are?"

I looked deep into her soul. "Yes—because I love you too."

Juliana was startled into silence.

I put my hands on her arms. "I understand now that you didn't return to L.A. to seek the Società's protection. I believe you that you only wanted to see your sister, and that you always intended to return to me."

"You do?"

'Yes, I do." Gabriel Santino turning up had been a surprise to her and she hadn't planned anything with him. I knew in my heart that Juliana was not attracted to Gabriel Santino in any way.

Although I still remembered how Gabriel had looked at Juliana at the engagement party—even though she wasn't attracted to him, he had definitely been attracted to her. However, she was mine now. And, more importantly, she wanted to be mine.

My reaction to Gabriel's presence—my jealousy—drove home to me how strong my feelings for Juliana had become. What started as a plan for revenge turned into love somewhere along the way.

"You really love me?" she asked, her blue eyes wide.

"Yes, I really love you. I swore to myself that I'd never step foot in L.A. again after the church shootout. But I came back for you. I risked my life to rescue you, and I'd do it all over again if anyone ever dares to take you away from me," I growled.

"I'm just so happy to be back here with you."

"I was going mad when your father was holding you at his mansion and we had no way to rescue you. I don't know what I would have done if he'd

harmed you.” I pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. “I love you, Juliana. And I want to marry you.”

She frowned. “Um…we’re already married, in case you’ve forgotten?”

“Yes, but I never asked you. I just told you that you would marry me. Now I’m asking you.”

“And if I say no?”

“Do you want to say no?”

“I want to say yes,” she whispered.

“Because you love me?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Say it,” I demanded.

“Because I love you, Marco Marchiano.”

“And I love you too.”

I did love her. Perhaps I had loved her from the first moment I had seen her. Knowing that I could love this woman was an amazing feeling, although confusing at the same time.

But it was definitely a feeling I could get used to. And I wanted to get used to it—with Juliana at my side.

"Despite everything that's happened and the darkness inside me that I've forced you to witness, you still want me, and you want to love me. I don’t understand it."

"Maybe that's what love is about—going along with the universe’s plan for you."

"I'm a bad man, and my ways may at times seem harsh, and I won't ever change. But all logic flies out of the window for me where you're concerned—you've captured my heart, captured my soul, and captured my love."

She smiled at me.

And I grinned back at her. “Everything’s settled then. Now let’s get you up to bed so that I can make love to my pretty little fiancée.”

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EPILOGUE

JULIANA

I didn’t think Marco was serious about having another wedding. But it turned out that he was completely serious, and he arranged for us to have a blessing in the church a few weeks later.

I was glad about it being in a church. The ceremony at the hotel had been quick and efficient, and it hadn’t felt real. No matter how much money had been spent that day on the hotel, dress, and reception, that wedding had been devoid of love and true feeling. I wasn’t a religious person, but when I had thought about getting married, I had always imagined that I would get married in a church in front of a priest.

I think Debi was even more excited than me about the church blessing and she was enjoying helping with all the preparations. I had never

imagined that I would be thinking about wedding dresses and bouquets again.

Doing these things together with Debi made us grow closer. I was glad for that, both for me but also for her. It couldn't have been easy for her growing up without a mother in a house full of boys. They loved her more than life itself, but I couldn't imagine not having a sister to confide in and share things with.

And that's what we were now—sisters. No one would ever take the place of Jess, but Debi was special in her own way. She was gentle and sweet and easy to love. I could see why her brothers adored her.

Sometimes I worried about what the Mafia world would throw her way. Being in our world wasn't easy, but she had always had the protection of her brothers. What would happen when she married and left home?

Being concerned for her in this way made me realize how much I truly cared for her. I was determined that when the day came, Marco and her brothers would only marry her to someone who truly deserved her, irrespective of the needs of the Fratellanza.

Since Marco had proposed to me in the orchard, he had been treating me differently. He was softer with me in some ways, as if he was now willing to show his feelings to me. I knew that couldn't be easy for him after having been told growing up that he needed to be emotionless and ruthless.

He was, little by little, letting me into his heart. He knew now that I didn't want to deceive him or hurt him, and I knew he felt the same way toward me.

One of the biggest practical changes for me was that he had given me a cell phone and I was able to call my siblings. I hoped that in time that Jess and I would be able to get back to where we had been, where we'd been

able to tell each other everything. I knew that I was a Marchiano now and our families were enemies, but that didn't mean that Jess and I couldn't be close.

***

I decided to call Jacob today to see if he knew anything more about what was going on with Jess.

It was great being able to talk to my siblings, although I knew Jess and Jacob kept my calls a secret from our parents. Once my parents had known that I'd married a Marchiano, they'd declared me to be no longer a part of their family or the Società.

"Hi Jake."

"Hey Juliana. How are you?"

After exchanging news of how we'd been since our last call together, I moved on to the reason for my call. "Jess won't tell me what's wrong. Do you know what's going on with her, Jake?" Even if my parents no longer considered me family, I wasn't ever going to abandon my brother and sister.

"I don't know. I don't think there's any specific issue. My dealings with Rafael have been fairly limited. I tend to work more with Gabriel, so I've never got to know Rafael particularly well."

"Yet Jess seems terrified. Do you think she's terrified of him, or of getting married, or both?"

"I really don't know. But I'll keep an eye on her, I promise, and I'll keep in touch with you about it."

“Thanks, Jake. That will make me feel a bit better about it all. And Jake…”

“Yeah?”

“I…I just wanted to say sorry again—about what Marco did to you when he caught you trying to rescue me. I’m so sorry you got hurt.”

“It’s part of the job,” he replied unemotionally. Then his voice softened. “It was more than the job, actually—it was about you. And I would go through it all again if you ever needed me to.”

We were both silent for a moment, lost in our thoughts. Jacob turned the subject to me. “Tell me, how have you been?”

I’d already told him during our last phone call about the blessing ceremony; however, he hadn’t been entirely convinced that I was genuinely happy about it, no matter how much I had tried to explain things to him.

I also had something else to tell him today. “Jake, I’ve got some news.” I was nervous to tell him. I didn’t know why—actually, maybe I did know.

“Good news, I hope?”

After a slight pause, I spoke. “I’m pregnant—I’m having a baby.” I’d already told Marco a couple of days ago and he’d been over the moon.

“Dear God.” I could hear the shock in Jacob’s voice, even over the phone.

“No, it’s good news, Jake.”

“Is that why you went back with *him* to Chicago and didn’t put up more of a fight?” he asked, not even being able to bring himself to utter Marco’s name.

“No, I didn’t know I was pregnant when I came to L.A. to see Jess. I went back with Marco because I love him.” I had tried to make Jacob understand this several times already, but I knew he still couldn’t get his

head around it. “I’m happy now. I’m happy being married to Marco. And I’m excited about this baby.”

There was silence on the phone before Jacob spoke again. “Did you do the right thing, just tell me that?” he asked, quietly.

I didn’t have to hesitate before I answered. “Yes, I did.” I knew that Jacob and Jessica might never understand my reasons, but I also knew that I was now where I belonged and where my heart belonged.

“That’s all I need to know. Look, I have to go now, but I’ll keep an eye on things with Jess. She’ll still be nearby once she’s married, so if she needs anything I’ll be here for her. Just like I’ll always be here for you, Juliana. If you’re happy, then that’s all I want for you. I couldn’t bear to think of you as being unhappy or trapped with a man you didn’t love.”

“I’m not, I promise you, Jake.”

“You know I’m here for you if you ever need me, don’t you?”

“I know, Jake. And thank you. That means a lot to me.”

I knew my parents would never have me back. I was a Marchiano now: I’d slept with the enemy, married him, and was having his baby.

But I didn’t want to go back to L.A.

Chicago and the Marchiano mansion were my home now, and that was where I wanted to be.

***

One afternoon, I was on the couches with Debi, with a heap of bridal magazines next to us. Debi had gone slightly overboard—I think she must

have got a copy of every bridal magazine in the shop.

We also had a pile of baking magazines. Debi wanted to bake a cake to have after the blessing and she wanted to get some ideas. “How about a red velvet layer cake with chocolate frosting?” suggested Debi, showing me a picture of such a cake.

“That looks gorgeous—I’m up for anything with chocolate.”

I looked up as Marco, Alessio and Camillo walked into the house, back from doing some business. I had just opened a parcel that had been delivered and was pulling out the contents.

“What in God’s name is that?” asked Alessio, as I pulled out an outfit for Mr. Fluffy. It was a red satin waistcoat and matching bow tie.

“It’s an outfit for Mr. Fluffy to wear to the church blessing.”

Camillo grimaced. “You can’t be serious. He’s a dog.”

“Yes, I’m completely serious. Mr. Fluffy loves dressing up and he’ll look perfect. You know, I’m the bride and I should get whatever I want.”

“Bridezilla,” muttered Camillo under his breath but loud enough for everyone to hear.

Marco slapped Camillo around his head. “Hey, she’s right. It’s her wedding, and she gets whatever she wants this time after the almighty shit-show the first time around.”

Camillo rubbed his head with his hand. “Man, you’re already pussy-whipped. But at least she makes you less grumpy than usual.” Camillo laughed as he dodged Marco trying to slap him again.

I had come to realize that Camillo was a bit of a gentle giant around his family, which was at odds with the role he played within the Fratellanza. All Made Men had violence running through their core, but some of them had more of a conscience than others.

I still got the sense that Camillo's Made Man pride was a little wounded after Mr. Fluffy had bitten him the first time they'd met, but he definitely seemed to be getting over it. Despite his tough guy persona, Camillo was like a big teddy bear around his younger siblings.

Alessio looked at Marco and grinned. "Camillo's right, you know. You are less grumpy nowadays. Juliana is good for you."

That sounded a bit like a compliment to me, and it felt good that Alessio was starting to accept me into the family too. My relationship with this family had started in the worst possible way, but everything had changed for the better now.

I went over to the kitchen to make some coffee and Alessio followed as he made for the fridge. I saw him rummaging for a snack. I wondered if this might be a good time to say something to him and I decided to just go ahead before I lost my nerve.

"I'm sorry if Mr. F brings back bad memories for you," I said cautiously to Alessio. He and I had got off on the wrong foot, what with everything with the church shootout and then Mr. Fluffy arriving unexpectedly.

Alessio regarded me carefully and was silent. My words must have made him realize that Marco had told me about his dog, Comet, and what had happened to their mom. I hoped that I hadn't said the wrong thing.

"It's not that so much. I just didn't want Debi and Danio getting attached to Mr. F. In our world, the fewer people we are close to, the simpler things are for us."

"Danio is almost sixteen, and he and Debi will be adults before you know it. You can't protect them forever."

"You wanna bet? I'll kill anyone who hurts any of my siblings, especially Debi," growled Alessio.

“One day Debi will fall in love and that means that she will give her heart to someone, making her vulnerable to getting hurt.”

“You’ve fallen in love with Marco, and you haven’t gotten hurt.”

I was thoughtful for a few seconds. “I’m happy, but that doesn’t mean that falling in love hasn’t hurt me. I’ve lost my family now that I’ve decided to stay here. I mean, I still get to talk to my sister and brother sometimes, but there’s a barrier up between us now, like we’re on different sides of the war. Jake got hurt because of me and Jessica doesn’t really confide in me anymore. I feel like I’ve lost part of my old life and I’m working hard to try and get it back.”

Alessio looked at me. “I’m sorry that you’ve had to go through that, really I am. I consider you family now and I don’t like to see you hurting.”

We sat at the kitchen island in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, just watching my dog run around. “You know what would cheer me up?” I suddenly said to Alessio.

“I get the feeling I’m not going to like what you’re about to say…”

“I think we should get Mr. Fluffy a girlfriend—”

“No fucking way. I’ve given in over Mr. F living here, but we’re not having another dog in the house.”

“But—”

“No.”

I decided to quit while I was ahead. Today Alessio had admitted that he didn’t hate me and that was a massive step forward for me. This was my family now, and I had all the time in the world to build my life here.

***

The next day, I was watching Marco cook dinner. “So, you still think animals are more worthy of your care than humans?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” I answered slowly, not sure where he was going with this.

He fixed his dark stare upon me. “I’ve looked into it and if you still want to, then you can do a veterinary nurse college course.”

My jaw felt open. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah.”

Suddenly my soaring heart crashed back down to earth.

A frown crossed Marco’s brow. “What’s wrong? I thought you’d be pleased.”

“It’s just that my father made me leave school before I could get my high school diploma. I wouldn’t be accepted onto a college course.”

“You can get your high school diploma first. There’ll be distance-learning courses for all that shit too. And if you can’t get onto the course you want, I’ll just have to bribe the admissions officer—or do something else to him.”

I stood frozen to the spot for a few seconds, unbelieving of what I’d just heard. As comprehension sunk in, I flew into Marco’s arms, laughing and kissing him at the same time. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“There are conditions though,” he said sternly.

“Of course there are,” I couldn’t stop myself from rolling my eyes.

“I’m not giving you complete free reign with this. You’re my wife now and attending college would pose too many dangers. You’ll have to study via distance-learning, and any practical classes you need to complete will be taught to you on a one-to-one basis.”

I couldn’t be a normal college student, but I didn’t care as I was so thrilled that he was allowing me to do this. Of course, I would have to take some time off when the baby was born, but there was no rush, and I could fit the course in around raising the baby.

“And I’m not saying you can get a job yet. That’s something we’ll have to talk about in the future. You’re going to be busy enough over the next few years studying and having babies.”

I nodded. “I’ll have as many babies as you want. I love you, Marco.”

“Good. I want you to be happy in this marriage. If going to school will make you happy, then I’m okay with that. Our way of life constrains us, but I’ll never be like your father—I’ll do whatever is in my power to make you happy and keep you safe at the same time.”

***

On the afternoon of the blessing, I got dressed with Debi’s help.

This time around, I was wearing a much simpler white dress. I’d worn an elaborate wedding dress twice now, but today was going to be different from the last two times. And today was definitely the last time I would be doing this.

My dress was full-length, fitted to my body and made of a light satin fabric, with narrow straps to hold it up.

I left my glossy dark hair to tumble over my shoulders, just like I knew Marco liked it, and my bouquet was an arrangement of white roses which

Danio had collected this morning from the gardens and had bound together with a white ribbon.

When Danio came in with my bouquet, I turned from the mirror where I was getting ready. “Thanks, Danio, the roses are gorgeous, and this bouquet is just perfect,” I said while giving him a kiss on the cheek in thanks.

After he had gone, Debi said, “Danio’s really sweet, isn’t he? I mean, you know, for a guy.”

“Yes, he definitely got most of the charm genes in this family. One day he’s going to make a great husband for some lucky girl.”

I turned back to the mirror and applied my makeup. I kept it simple and natural, keeping in line with the much simpler theme of the ceremony today. While I put on some mascara, Debi got Mr. F ready in his waistcoat and bow tie. I was glad that we had gotten the outfit for him—he was going to look great, and it had been great fun picking it out with Debi. Who knew there were so many websites dedicated to doggy wedding outfits?

My pooch, however, was in a particularly playful mood and seemed more interested in having a tug of war with the bow tie, than getting dressed in it. “Come on, Mr. F, you want to look smart today for Juliana, don’t you? You can’t let those other boys look smarter than you. You’re going to be the most handsome boy in the church today.”

Debi was giggling away when Marco came in. “Hey, what about me? Aren’t I supposed to be the most handsome boy today?” he teased Debi.

“You know I think you’re great, Marco, but you don’t have the same cuteness factor as Mr. F,” replied Debi seriously, making me laugh at Marco’s pretend look of devastation.

“The boys are waiting downstairs and Camillo will drive you all to the church,” he told Debi.

“Do you think Camillo will let me take Mr. F in his car?”

“Shortcake, you only have to bat your eyelashes at him, and he’ll let you have whatever you want.”

She finished tying the bow tie on Mr. F. “There, you look great now.” She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before taking Mr. F and heading downstairs.

MARCO

“Mrs. Marchiano, you look stunning.”

“Will I do?”

“Always,” I said with a grin. It was true that Juliana made me happier. I had never felt that my life was missing anything until she had come along.

I wrapped my hand around her stomach, resting my hand there. “How’s our baby doing today?” *Our baby*. I still couldn’t believe it, and whenever I thought about it, it made an ecstatic feeling flutter through my heart.

“Good so far. I didn’t throw up this morning and as long as I don’t throw up while I’m standing at the altar, then I’ll be happy.”

I looked deep into her eyes. “And are you happy?” I had asked her this before, but I had to be sure.

“Definitely. I know it’s pretty soon to be having a baby, but I’m really happy about it. Although maybe I’ve just gone crazy if I’m looking forward to having little Marchianos running around the place.”

“I like the idea of a mini-Marco,” I quipped. “I’m Capo and therefore I need an heir and a spare—so we’ll have a couple of boys first and then a girl.”

“How many babies do you expect me to have?” exclaimed Juliana.

“With all the practice we’re getting, it will be a few at this rate,” I growled into her ear before nuzzling her neck. I couldn’t keep my hands off this woman.

I held out my arm and she placed her smaller arm in mine. I walked her down to my car and together we made our way to the church. Today at the ceremony, it was just going to be the two of us, my siblings, and Anni and Lorenzo with their two kids. And Mr. F, of course.

Lorenzo's daughter, Clara, was a flower girl during our blessing ceremony. I’m sure Lorenzo wouldn’t have allowed her to take part in one of my previous weddings, but today was low-key and I had assured him that Clara would be completely safe.

The four-year-old girl looked adorable in her off-white dress, cautiously tottering down the aisle as her chubby hands carefully sprinkled petals along her route.

Anni looked on with happiness on her face, while Lorenzo looked like he would burst with pride as he watched his little girl. He shot a look at Anni, and I could see in that look how much he loved his wife.

As Clara reached the altar, I scooped her up in his arms. “You did an amazing job, Clara,” I said gently to the little girl.

She smiled shyly up at me as I gave her a kiss on her pink cheek before turning around and handing her to Lorenzo.

Lorenzo held Clara close, his daughter resting her tiny hands against his broad chest. “You’re the most beautiful flower girl I’ve ever seen, mia preziosa,” he crooned at her, earning him a beaming smile from his little girl as she nestled into his hold and sought his closeness. “I love you,

Dadda," she said quietly to him as she laid her head in the crook of his neck.

Just before Juliana started her walk down the aisle toward me, I shot a smile at Debi. And I got a gorgeous smile back from her. Man, Debi was going to be a heartbreaker one day, especially with those big brown eyes of hers.

Finally, Juliana made her way toward me, this time all smiles and with love in her eyes.

Father Ugolino was our family priest and performed the blessing. We had decided to make the traditional Catholic vows today because we didn't get married in a church last time. I wanted to give Juliana whatever she wanted to make her happy.

"Marco and Juliana, have you come here to enter into marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?"

Juliana and I smiled at each other because, this time, we did both want this wholeheartedly.

I replied, "I have," and Juliana said, "I have."

"Are you prepared, as you follow the path of marriage, to love and honor each other for as long as you both shall live? And are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his church?"

I replied, "I am."

Juliana looked at me with love in her eyes and said, "I am." We couldn't wait to meet our first child, although we knew that we might have to prepare Mr. F for it first.

Since my proposal to Juliana, he had stopped nipping at my ankles so much. Maybe he could sense that everyone was calmer and happier, and it

was rubbing off on him too. He definitely preferred females and kids—Juliana, Debi and Danio were his clear favorites.

Father Ugolino asked us to join our right hands. I turned to Juliana to make my vows to her. “I, Marco, take you, Juliana, to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”

Then it was Juliana’s turn. “I, Juliana, take you, Marco, to be my husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”

I felt my heart beat faster as I heard her finally say these words willingly.

Father Ugolino asked for the rings, which we had removed before the service. Juliana had wanted the rings blessed by the priest.

I took Juliana’s band and slid it onto her finger. “Juliana, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Juliana then took my wedding band, and I held out my hand to her. “Marco, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

When Father Ugolino announced that I could kiss my wife, I didn’t hesitate. However, Mr. F sounded a loud bark, whether in protest or celebration I wasn’t sure. We all laughed. This was how a wedding day should be: full of family and full of laughter.

I had never imagined that my wedding day would be like this. Now that I had found Juliana and found love, I wasn’t going to let them go. Juliana gave me more than love—she gave me happiness and a sense of completeness.

JULIANA

We got back to the mansion in the early evening.

Marco and Alessio had planned a cookout in the garden. When we got back home, we all helped to carry the food outside. I kept the same dress on—it was simple and easy to wear, and I didn't feel the need to change out of it.

The guys grilled chicken, steak, and burgers and had prepared a potato salad, homemade coleslaw, and a green salad with sundried tomatoes, mozzarella, basil, and olive oil.

I was getting spoiled by all the good food the guys cooked and I definitely felt inadequate when I thought about my non-existent cooking skills. I had already looked into taking some cooking classes so that I could do my fair share of making dinners.

While the guys stood around the grill, I sat and talked with Anni.

"When I watched Marco with Clara in the church earlier," I said, "I could tell that he's going to be a wonderful father in the same way Lorenzo is. And that thought has made me even more excited about the baby growing inside of me."

"I'm so happy that things have worked out for the two of you," she replied. "There aren't many women who could handle Marco, but I think you're perfect for each other."

I looked over Anni's outfit and admired her pale pink vintage 1960s dress, which she wore with bright orange ballet flats that had pink bows at the front.

“I’ll soon have to start to think about getting some bigger clothes. Some things are starting to feel tight,” I said as I ran my hand over my stomach. “But I haven’t really seen many maternity clothes that I like.”

“I make some of my own clothes, and I often customize clothing and shoes that I’ve bought,” commented Anni. “I could help you make some maternity clothes if you like?”

Before I could answer, Marco interrupted. “No offense, Anni, but I don’t want my wife taking any weird fashion tips from you—I like the way she dresses just fine.”

“No offense, Marco, but I think your wife is capable of thinking for herself,” Anni shot back at him, making me grin. I loved the way she stood up for herself.

When the food was ready, the whole family ate outside, and the food was delicious as we chatted with each other and enjoyed the last of the sun. After we had eaten, I went over to Alessio to thank him for the cookout. “Thanks for all your cooking today. I really enjoyed it.”

“No problem. I’m glad to see you and Marco happy.” And he genuinely seemed to mean it.

After the cookout, we stayed outside talking and laughing. I had begun to see Marco’s siblings as my family now. Chicago was my home.

It was getting chilly despite the fire pit we were sitting around, but I didn’t want to break the moment to go grab a sweater. I rubbed my hands up and down my arms, trying to get some heat into my body.

Danio, who was sitting next to me, handed me his hoodie. “Here, this will keep you warm.”

“Thanks, Danio,” I said with a smile at him.

We both looked over to Alessio, who was straightening Mr. Fluffy's bow tie which had become crooked during all his running around the gardens. "You know, Mr. F really adores Alessio, even if Alessio grumbles about him nonstop," observed Danio.

"Animals are like that," I smiled. "They can always sense who their real fans are." I had a feeling that Alessio was much fonder of Mr. Fluffy than he let on.

Marco came over and wrapped his arm around me, hugging me to his warmth. I snuggled up to him, enjoying the closeness and affection. "Happy?" he asked, looking into my eyes with his soft gray eyes.

"Yes, definitely." I could see the love in his eyes, and I knew that I would have that from him for the rest of our lives. I looked around my new family as they sat around the fire pit. I was going to be happy here.

Today hadn't been the big wedding originally planned by our families. But today also hadn't been a wedding of two strangers on opposite sides of a Mafia war. I was part of this family now, for better or for worse.

At that thought, my heart swelled with love as I looked over at Marco Marchiano: he was the King of Chicago, my Capo, and my husband.

And he was forever mine.

Thanks so much for reading. See here for a free **BONUS EPILOGUE** if you are already missing Marco and Juliana: https://BookHip.com/CSZBRAD

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SNEAKPEEK

MAFIA AND PROTECTOR
A DARK ARRANGED MARRIAGE ROMANCE
(MARCHIANO MAFIA SERIES)

CHAPTER 1

Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
— the words every Made Man recites upon a death.

JESSICA

“Jessica, your father wants to see you in his office.” My mother, Casmundina Bonardi, had just dashed into my bedroom and was acting all dramatic as usual.

“You mean right now?” I asked her.

“Yes, straight away. What on earth are you wearing?” She grimaced as she saw me dressed in my lilac sundress, with my dark, wavy hair pulled back into a simple French braid that was already starting to unravel. “I thought I told you to get rid of that dress. It’s shabby and does nothing to enhance your plain features.”

It was a hot day here in L.A. and my outfit was perfect for the weather. “But, Mother, I like this dress and you know it’s my favorite.”

“You’re eighteen years old now. That dress makes you look like you’re fourteen and still a schoolgirl.” She seemed to have forgotten that I *had* been a schoolgirl until just a couple of weeks ago when I’d finished high school.

“I thought it would be okay to wear it since I’m just spending the day at home—”

My mother cut me off. “There’s no time to change now. You know your father hates to be kept waiting. You need to put some shoes on.”

She threw open my closet door and grabbed a pair of five-inch spiky heels for me to slide my bare feet into. My mother had bought these shoes for me some time ago, though I had so far managed to avoid wearing them.

The sparkly gold shoes looked ridiculous with my dress, but there was no time to argue over her choice of footwear.

“*Pronti?*” My mother asked if I was ready. She always broke into Italian when she was nervous. Or when she was excited, or happy, or sad, or angry

—so, basically, when any sort of emotion reared its head.

“I think so.”

“Quickly now, you don’t want to anger him.”

She was right—I definitely didn’t want to anger him. My father, Cecilio Bonardi, was a *Made Man*—a man initiated into the Mafia. He’d always been fairly short-tempered; however, after the recent kidnapping of my older sister, Juliana, he’d been as explosive as a piece of dry tinder. I really missed Juliana—I hoped she would be home soon and that things would go back to normal.

I rushed downstairs to the office which was located at the front of the house.

As I hastened my step, I ran my palms over my wavy hair, trying to smooth any stray tendrils. Maybe if my hair looked half-decent, my father wouldn’t notice my dress.

I knocked on his office door, waiting as always until I heard the deep ‘enter’.

I opened the door to his office, hoping that he wasn’t irritated with how long it had taken me to answer his summons. As I hurried into the room, I suddenly came to an abrupt halt as I realized that he was not alone.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Father. Mother said that you wanted to see me? I didn’t know that you had company. I’ll come back later.”

“No, Jessica, stay. We’ve been waiting for you.”

My heart started pounding in my chest. In the room was the *Capo*, Emanuel Santino—he was the boss of the Società Mafia. From their base in Los Angeles, the Società ran their criminal empire and ruled over the West Coast.

The Capo sat in one of the wingback leather chairs in front of my father's desk. Standing by the fireplace was his oldest son and heir, Gabriel, and his second son, Rafael. My thoughts were racing through my mind. I hadn't done anything that could incur the wrath of the Capo…or had I?

I hated this room and had always tried to avoid this part of the house to minimize the chance of running into my father or any of the men who worked for him. And there were a lot of comings and goings, given that my father was one of Emanuel Santino's *Underbosses*, meaning that he held a powerful position within the organization.

"Sit down," my father commanded me.

In my haste to obey, I wobbled in my heels and lost my balance.

I managed to grab the edge of his desk in time, preventing me from falling flat on my face, although I couldn't stop the flush from rising up my cheeks.

I hoped that no one had seen, but one look at the expressions on the faces of the Santinos was enough to tell me that they had definitely noticed my clumsiness.

I silently cursed my mother for making me wear these ludicrous shoes.

I gratefully sank myself down into the second wingback chair, sitting on the edge of the seat with my hands tightly clasped in my lap. I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Is there something wrong, Father?"

"You must know that we have always hoped for a marriage bond between our family, the Bonardis, and the Santino family. We have now decided to go ahead with that union."

Oh my God. They'd found my older sister, Juliana!

My heart soared—they'd finally gotten my sibling back after her kidnapping a few weeks ago. Gabriel Santino was in love with Juliana. It

had always been thought that they would marry, and now they finally could.

“You’ve found Juliana?” My voice was giddy with excitement.

“Do not mention that girl’s name in this house! Everyone in the Società knows that she is a slut,” thundered my father, the venom in his voice making me sink back into my chair. “Your sister means nothing to me now. She is no longer part of this family.”

My father paused for a moment as if collecting himself, before continuing. “We have decided that you will marry into the Santino family.”

“I’m to marry Gabriel?” I was dumbfounded.

“No, he’s not interested in you.” My father was as blunt as always. “Instead, Emanuel has suggested his second son, Rafael. You will marry him in two months’ time.”

I stole a glance across at Rafael, who stood leaning against the mantel of the fireplace.

Despite his casual stance, Rafael’s whole demeanor was icy. He had handsome features and sandy-blonde hair, but it was his dark blue eyes that I noticed as they radiated a stark coldness. A shiver ran through me.

The Società Mafia had started out by controlling the port and the drug trade in L.A. before extending its influence into other activities. Now it was one of the most formidable criminal organizations in the US, and the Santinos were some of the most powerful—and most feared—men in the country.

“What does Mother think about this?” I squeaked, forgetting my place. My father didn’t like to be questioned about anything, even if it did concern my whole life.

“Your mother will do whatever is the best for this family and the Società, as will you,” snapped my father. “We will sign the engagement contract

today.” The Mafia was still a traditional institution and families followed the custom of signing an engagement contract.

“Today?” I blurted out. My mind was scrambling, trying to calculate the age gap between Rafael and me. He was twenty-five years, if I remembered correctly, making him seven years older than me.

“Yes, today,” interjected Emanuel Santino.

My gaze darted across to Rafael again and I wondered what he thought about this marriage. A black Brioni suit hugged his muscular body. Brioni and black: the typical Mafia uniform. And although his suit was obviously expensive, there was something untamed about him, and that sent a shiver through my body.

I knew that he couldn’t be thrilled with me as his future wife. After all, I knew that everyone thought I was plain and unattractive. It was my older sister who was the beauty of the family, and she’d always been the one to draw admiring looks. I’m sure he had expected, as the second son of the Capo, that he would at least marry someone prettier than me.

Emanuel pushed the engagement contract across the desk until it was in front of me. He might be Capo, but he was also a slimeball who treated his wife with a complete lack of respect, sleeping around with a long line of lovers and hookers. I prayed Rafael did not take after his father.

“Um…please may I ask why we are signing this today? Usually, the contract is signed at the engagement party.” I was unable to keep the bewilderment from my voice.

“The engagement party will be in a week’s time; however, we want this finalized today,” said the Capo. “Everyone is unsettled after the recent kidnapping of a Mafia daughter. We must focus on making the Società as strong as possible from within, and there is no better way than by a

marriage between the families of the Capo and his Underboss. Once this contract is signed, we can announce the engagement to the rest of the organization. This union will be a demonstration of strength to the rest of the Società. And that should put a stop to the various jitters and rumors swirling around."

Great, I was being used as a means to quiet the gossipmongers and calm the over-wrought nerves within the Società, regardless of what I might actually want.

I worried my lower lip, trying to think of a way to delay the signing. I was told two minutes ago that I was to marry Rafael Santino, and now I was being asked to sign away my life to him via the engagement contract. I knew that once the contract was signed, there was no way out and that I would be bound to Rafael Santino forever.

But then, I thought to myself, I am a Mafia daughter—I had no choice in the matter of who I was to marry. Did it really matter if I signed the contract now or next week? There was no way out of this, no way to escape Rafael Santino, no matter what my wishes on the subject were.

I licked my dry lips and picked up my father's favorite fountain pen.

I looked up and in desperation said, "Wouldn't Gabriel prefer to wait for Juliana to return, and then he can marry her? And then our families will be united through that marriage?" I couldn't stop the words tumbling out—why couldn't I just keep my mouth shut?

"For God's sake, Jessica!" My father really lost it now. "She's obviously no longer pure. When we get her back, no decent man will look at her. She'll be worth no more than a used whore. Now sign the damn contract. We need to move on now that your sister is no longer of any use to us."

Gabriel’s jaw tensed and his eyes darkened at my father’s harsh words. It was obvious he was still interested in Juliana, and I was glad that someone else apart from me still believed in her and realized that what had happened wasn’t her fault.

I signed my name slowly, all the while wondering if this was really happening. As I completed my signature, I laid the pen down carefully next to the papers.

Rafael prowled toward me, his jaw tightly clenched. He took the pen to sign his own name, and as he towered above me with his tall frame, I wished I had thought to push the contract toward him so that he wouldn’t have to stand so near to me.

He was so close that I could smell him—a clean, masculine scent with a hint of cologne. As he wrote, I noticed his strong wrists. They were tanned and my eyes followed the trail of sandy hair which disappeared into the sleeve of his dress shirt.

After he had finished signing his name, I glanced down at my fingers, seeing that some black ink had leaked from the fountain pen and stained my fingers.

I felt like I wanted to wash my hands straightaway. In fact, I wanted to wash my whole body and try to wash away the stain of the Mafia, the stain of this life that I’d been born into. But I knew that even though I could wash away the ink, I could never get rid of my duty as a Mafia daughter. I could never get rid of my obligation to marry this man standing next to me.

After we had both signed the contract, I knew that there was no way out for me, and I was now bound to the Santino family for life.

Great, I thought, I’m marrying into a family where the father is a murderous psychopath, his eldest son is still in love with my older sister,

and the man I am going to marry was…well, I don’t know what he was because I’d never even spoken to him.

Emanuel stood. “We should leave the couple alone for a minute so that Rafael can present the engagement ring.” With that, they filed out of the office while they carried on talking about business matters, leaving me sitting in the chair and Rafael standing over me.

This couldn’t be any more awkward. Wasn’t getting engaged supposed to be romantic?

But then, this wasn’t a usual sort of engagement. As was the norm in the Mafia world, our families had arranged this marriage. Rafael clearly wasn’t interested in me—he’d never sought me out at formal Società functions to talk or ask me to dance. He was just marrying me to keep his father happy and the Società stable.

His whole energy filled the room, his proximity unnerving me and his scent consuming me. I didn’t know where to look or what I was supposed to do.

“Stand up.” His low voice penetrated the silence.

I would prefer to have remained sitting rather than risking standing on these heels again, but I guess he couldn’t put the ring on like that. I slowly got to my feet, my left hand holding onto the edge of my father’s desk for support.

He got out a small velvet box and opened it to reveal a large oval diamond flanked by two smaller sapphires, all set on a thin band of platinum. It was an exquisite design.

I watched as he removed the ring from the box and brought it toward me. “Give me your hand”. Was anything he said not a command?

I hesitated, not wanting to let go of the desk in case I lost my balance again.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” he said softly, as if realizing why I was reluctant to give him my hand.

I slowly gave him my hand, and as his fingers touched me for the first time, I felt a flush run up my cheeks and my heart thud too fast. It was the first time I had been touched by a man who was not a family member.

He slid the ring onto my left hand, but he didn’t let go of it immediately. Instead, he admired the ring on me.

I discreetly looked at him. Up close, I could see that the stormy dark blue of his eyes was warmed by some lighter turquoise streaks. And as I ran my gaze over his hair, I thought somehow he was less scary than I imagined he would be. Yet I knew how deceptive appearances could be. And he was a Santino—there was nothing that wasn’t scary about that family.

“I was taken by surprise when my father said our families want us to marry,” I said in a rush.

“I could tell by your reaction.”

“Oh, I don’t want you to think it was personal against you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve had worse said to me than someone indicating they’d prefer my brother marry into their family,” he drawled.

I flushed. “I didn’t mean any offense.”

“I’ll survive.” His response was curt.

I fiddled with my hair, trying to tuck in the loose strands. “Sorry, I didn’t get a chance to brush my hair before my father summoned me.”

“No matter. It looks fine.”

“Do you think? My parents like me dressed properly, especially in front of company.” I realized then how that sounded and rushed on. “Not that I

don’t dress properly at other times.” Jesus, why was I rambling in front of this man?

There was an awkward silence, and I willed myself not to fill it with any more of my gabbling.

“Do you always wear those shoes?” he said dryly.

I frowned, wondering if he was making fun of me.

Deep in thought, I flinched when he brought his hand up to my face.

He ran his thumb over my brow and my eyes didn’t leave his gaze. “You shouldn’t frown so much.”

I didn’t know what to say, yet I felt the frown relaxing under his thumb. His touch was gentle, but I knew better than to be disarmed by small gestures. He was a Made Man, and his whole life was about violence and cruelty.

He slowly dropped his hand as our fathers returned to the room.

My father’s voice broke the tension in the room. “That’s all we need from you, Jessica.” He was dismissing me. I should have been relieved that I could escape this room now. However, I was confused—was this all the discussion there was going to be about the biggest decision of my life? About whom I was going to marry?

I bit down on my lower lip, knowing there was nothing I could say now. So, I walked toward the door and let myself out quietly.

I ran up to my bedroom, keeping my head down and trying to keep my tears at bay until I was safely ensconced in my room. I didn’t want any of the live-in staff to see my distress. My mother had always drummed into me the need to maintain appearances.

I didn’t have long to myself before my mother appeared at my bedroom door, pouncing on me immediately. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere,

Jessica! Why are you hiding yourself up here? Did you sign the engagement contract?”

“Yes, I did. Why didn’t you tell me that Father wanted to see me to inform me of my engagement?” I had felt ambushed, and I couldn’t help the hint of accusation in my voice.

“It wasn’t my place to say. He wanted to tell you himself. What did Rafael think of you?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t speak and he barely looked at me. I’ve never spoken to him before, and I didn’t even speak to him today.”

“No, of course he wouldn’t have noticed you before today. After all, you and Juliana were always joined at the hip, and standing next to her, it made you look even plainer.” My mother really knew how to boost my self-esteem. “Really, Jessica, what were you thinking putting on that lilac dress this morning? It makes you look unsophisticated and insignificant.”

My mother gave me no time to answer, however, and instead launched into wedding talk. “You will have to dazzle Rafael by wearing the most expensive wedding dress money can buy.”

“I’d prefer something simple and elegant.”

“Nonsense! People will be expecting something elaborate and opulent. After all, it will be the wedding of the year!”

I recalled her saying exactly the same thing about Juliana’s wedding—and we’d all seen how that had turned out.

I knew there was no way out of this marriage now that the contract had been signed. Once we were married, I would do my duty as a Mafia wife and do what Rafael expected of me. I knew I was plain, shy, and uninteresting. However, if I was a good wife to him, he might treat me with respect and remain faithful to me. Some arranged marriages turned into

love over time, and I was determined to work as hard as possible to achieve that within my own marriage. I wanted a loving husband with whom I could build a happy family life.

“Come along and change your dress right this minute,” nagged my mother. “Then it is only fit for the trash can.”

I would change out of my lilac dress to stop my mother from badgering me, but I definitely wouldn’t throw it away—I wasn’t going to give up my favorite dress so easily.

As I undressed, I couldn’t help thinking to myself that soon I was going to lose even more control of my life, and that thought made my blood run cold.

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“Ortensia Santino telephoned this morning,” my mother informed me later that week. Ortensia was Rafael’s mother. “She rang to arrange a doctor’s appointment for you to start on birth control. The Santinos are sending a car tomorrow, which will take you to see their doctor.”

“Couldn’t I just get it from our own doctor?” Better still, I thought, we could just not consummate our marriage at all. But I didn’t say that out loud because I knew that was out of the question.

Not only would I be expected to consummate the union on our wedding night, I would also be forced to provide evidence of it the next morning to all and sundry.

I knew that in line with the Sicilian tradition of *cunzata del letto*, the bed would be prepared with the ‘virgin sheet’. The virgin sheet could not be touched by married women; instead, just before the wedding, four unmarried girls would make up the bed with pure white, hand-embroidered sheets. They would also sprinkle rice between the sheets as good luck for the new bride’s fertility.

Tradition further dictated that on the morning after the wedding, the husband would hang the virgin sheet out on the balcony. It was proof to the families that the bride had been pure on her wedding night and that the marriage had been consummated.

The marriage could be annulled if it hadn’t been consummated, and an annulment would be a disaster given that the marriage was a strategic bond between the two families. The Mafia still followed this vulgar tradition of checking the virgin sheet. They loved anything to do with blood.

I shuddered at the humiliating thought of my bloodstained wedding sheets being on show to the whole of the Società. I wasn’t sure which was worse—the sheets being seen by some people who I barely knew, or the sheets being seen by my parents.

“It’s all arranged now, Jessica. Anyhow, the Santinos are only trying to help by making you an appointment with their doctor. Even if you don’t seem to appreciate it, at least they recognize how much I have on my plate to arrange a wedding within such a short timescale,” said my mother in a martyred tone.

She set a large box in front of me. “I’ve chosen what you will wear to the engagement party,” she announced, sounding exceptionally pleased with herself as she proceeded to pull a dress out.

I looked at it with undisguised dismay.

It was completely over the top. It was obvious my mother had bought it at Signora Demonte's boutique, otherwise known as *The Desperate Brides Boutique*. It was where Società mothers went to get 'eye-catching', high fashion dresses for their unmarried daughters to wear at Società functions in the hope of snaring a good husband.

The more desperate the parents got, the more daring the outfits became. It was an embarrassment for a Mafia daughter to not be engaged by the time there was a '2' at the front of her age—in other words, by her 20th birthday. On the other hand, the men were permitted to get engaged at a later age and no one raised a single eyebrow at their sleeping around and sowing their wild oats.

This was clearly one of Signora Demonte's signature dresses: low neckline – check, high hemline – check, sequins – check, lace – check, bright screaming color – check, clingy fabric – check, slutty – check.

My mother insisted I try on the dress. After I had put it on, I pulled down at the hemline, wondering if it would stretch any further.

"Mother, you know that this sort of dress really isn't my style."

"Jessica, first impressions count. And Rafael's first impression of you would have been awful in that dreadful lilac sundress you were wearing. We need to put you in a dress which will show him that you're not an unsophisticated young girl."

"But that's what I am," I wailed, although I knew I had no chance of changing her mind over the dress.

"Nonsense. This dress will transform his view of you."

Yes, he would now change his mind to thinking that I dressed like a call-girl. "What does it even matter what I wear to the engagement party? Rafael

has already seen me and he's signed the contract, so it's not as if he needs to be persuaded into marrying me."

"It's important he changes his view of you."

My heart sank to my stomach. "Did he say he wasn't happy with me…?"

"No, but of course he wouldn't have been happy—he wants a sophisticated wife. We can't do much about your disappointing looks, so we'll just have to try and impress him through your clothes. Even a plain Jane like you will look sensational in a dress like this."

Jesus, my mother was delusional.

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The next morning, when it was time to leave for the doctor's appointment, I was surprised to see that my mother wasn't getting ready to leave. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"No, Ortensia said that Emanuel told her that he had arranged everything so that I wouldn't need to attend with you. He is even sending a car and two of his soldiers to escort you. The Santinos are determined to get all the preparations out of the way and keep the wedding date on track. They know that the only way the Società will get some stability after recent events is through a Santino-Bonardi marriage."

I worried my lower lip. "But I don't know the doctor and I really want you to come with me for this."

"You have to appear to be a grown-up, confident young woman. After all, you are marrying into the Santino family, the head family of the Società."

I looked at her doubtfully.

“For goodness sake, Jessica, you will do this and attend by yourself. You will not embarrass this family any further, especially after what happened with your sister, and not to mention your outburst at the contract signing when you suggested Gabriel might still want to marry Juliana.”

“But I didn’t mean to embarrass our family when I said that. I only meant __”

My mother cut me short. “Jessica, you are a smart girl, so try not to act like a tactless American tonight. Sometimes I think we should have brought you up more in the traditions of the old country.”

The old country—Italy, of course.

My mother was always harking back to her land of birth, where she had lived until her parents brought her to America as a young child. She looked at life in Italy as the pinnacle of perfection, conveniently forgetting how much she enjoyed the trappings of her wealthy American lifestyle.

“Your father is still unhappy about what you said, so please think carefully before you speak today and make sure you do not cause any further shame to the Bonardi name.”

I headed out to the car sent by Emanuel Santino, sitting in the back behind the two soldiers sent to guard me.

I was wearing a white tailored dress, although its formal style wasn’t really to my taste, and I felt uncomfortable due to the neckline and cap sleeves being edged in scratchy lace trim.

I thought that white clothing always made me look washed out, my pale skin merging with the pale fabric, making me look sallow and tired. However, my mother had insisted that I wear white, cream, or ivory as much as possible in the run up to the wedding, so as to remind everyone

that I was the bride-to-be. She definitely wanted to shout it from the rooftops and emphasize to everyone that I was marrying into the Capo's family. My siblings and I had always joked that our mother, Casmundina Bonardi, was a typical Mafia wife: obedient and demure, yet ruthlessly ambitious for her family.

When I arrived at the clinic for my appointment, I was shown into a sterile examination room and introduced to the doctor.

I wasn't sure why, but something about his demeanor set me on edge, putting my senses on high alert.

"I need to ask you some questions and then we can get on to the examination."

Examination? No one had said anything about any examination. I felt a chill spread through me.

The doctor took my medical history and asked me all sorts of questions about my periods and whether I was still a virgin.

After that, he handed me a paper sheet. "Take off all your garments, including your bra and panties."

"I don't understand…why?"

"Didn't your mother explain? You will need a vaginal examination before I can prescribe you birth control, and I'll also need to examine your breasts. The contraceptive pill can lead to a higher risk of breast cancer, so you will need to have regular check-ups. Once you have undressed, wrap the paper sheet around yourself and lie down on the examination table."

Once the doctor had left the room to give me privacy, I quickly undressed and wrapped the crackly sheet around my body.

I had never had an internal examination. The Mafia didn't allow a girl to have a pap smear before her marriage, so as to prevent any accidental

damage to her hymen before her wedding night—they wanted to take no chances, given how important the bloodied bedsheets were in proving the bride's virginity.

I looked down at the sheet. I assumed it was to provide some modesty, although it only came to mid-thigh and I wished it covered more of me.

A few minutes later, I heard the door slowly open and close, and then heavy footsteps came into the room.

The doctor was back.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I sensed that something didn't feel quite right.

I looked up and felt the blood drain from my face...

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